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# The Rich Who Have the Humility of the Poor: Effects of Culture and Power on Altruism

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## Abstract

In this paper we investigate the effect of power on prosocial decision-making. While previous research has thoroughly investigated this relation in Western cultures, we focus our research on the role of power in an understudied Middle-Eastern culture. Existing literature suggest an inverse relationship between feeling of power and prosocial behavior, where generally people in high levels of power tend to act less sympathetically in their decisions and demonstrate declined levels of perspective taking towards others. Our findings demonstrate that, unlike their Western counterparts, Iranian participants show significantly higher levels of altruism when in a high-power situation perceived as *legitimate*. On the other hand, under *illegitimate* power conditions, participants primed with high-power act significantly less compassionately in comparison to their low-power counterparts. We believe these findings have great impact in studying social hierarchies and behavior in cross-cultural settings.

**Keywords:** altruism; power prime; social hierarchy; decision-making; cross-cultural differences

## Introduction

*The beloved of the Almighty are the rich who have the humility of the poor, and the poor who have the magnanimity of the rich.*

-Saadi, 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet

Persian literature comprises a rich collection of myths, stories, and poems praising altruism and courtesy, especially among the powerful. Iranian children are encultured with stories, in which great kings and leaders are portrayed as generous, altruistic individuals. Such cultural products, created over generations, store and transmit cultural wisdom, and affect different aspects of people's judgment and decision-making (Weber, Hsee & Sokolowska, 1998). Although the Iranian society has undergone a vast amount of societal change over the past decades, aspects of deeper cultural behavior have been transmitted through such cultural products, as tangible and public representations of the Iranian culture (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003).

Several lines of research associate power with self-interested behavior; linking it to lack of perspective taking (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi & Gruenfeld, 2006), egoism (Batson, 1991) and moral reasoning (Lammers, Stapel & Galinsky, 2010), among others. However, we argue that many of these findings are based on Western cultures,

relying on WEIRD populations (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010). It has been widely discussed that many models and theories of decision-making are based on cultural assumptions and may not be universally applicable (e.g. Dastmalchian, Javidan & Alam, 2001; Jones, 2010; Henrich, et al., 2010; Hofstede, 1980). Arnett (2008) argues that the majority of psychological research focuses on American subjects, thus, neglecting 95% of the world's population, a majority of whom live in vastly different societies. Further, limiting psychological models to small populations not only restricts the range that predictor variables can take, but also affectively limits discovery of other variables not yet included in the model (Weber & Hsee, 2000).

In this study, we explore how power is associated with altruistic and sympathetic behavior among Iranians. Specifically, we aim to understand how *legitimate* as opposed to *illegitimate* feeling of power may affect prosocial decision-making. In other words, not only when, but also why do "*the rich have the humility of the poor*"?

## Theories of Power

In the study of social relationships, power is often referred to as the fundamental concept and basic force of behavior (Fiske, 1993; Kemper, 1991). Power is also closely related to the structures of personality (Wiggins & Broughton, 1985). Thus, a wide range of research has focused on understanding how power influences various aspects of cognition, such as stereotyping (Fiske, 1993), social decision making (Gruenfeld, 1995), and perspective taking (Galinsky et al., 2006).

It has been widely argued that feeling of power results in displaying self-centered attitudes towards others, causing declined levels of perspective taking (Galinsky et al, 2006) and altruism (Batson, 1991). For example, in a recent study, Galinsky et al. (2006) asked participants under a high- or low-power experimental prime to draw an *E* on their foreheads – a procedure created by Hass (1984) to measure visual perspective taking of others. One way to draw the *E* is to consider one's own perspective, resulting in a backwards *E* illegible to other viewers. The other way is to consider others' perspective and draw an *E* backwards to oneself. They report that high-power participants were almost three times more likely to draw a self-oriented *E* than their low-power counterparts. Power is also linked to moral

hypocrisy, a situation of imposing firm moral standards on others, while practicing more tolerant moral standards oneself (Lammers, Stapel & Galinsky, 2010).

The Power-Approach theory (Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003) suggests that power increases goal-directed behavior without conscious awareness of its effects. This increase results in the powerful having a higher tendency to act and approach (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky, Gruenfeld & Magee, 2003). Correspondingly, in the context of decision-making and negotiations, the powerful are known to display higher aspirations (Pinkley, 1995), demand more and concede less (De Dreu, 1995), and often end up with the larger share of the pie in negotiations (Giebels, De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 2000). On the other hand, powerlessness has been reported to activate the behavioral inhibition system (Carver & White, 1994).

Further studies have shown that the link between power and goal-directed behavior is not always such straightforward. In fact, illegitimacy of the power involved may break this link (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn & Otten, 2008a). Investigating the role of legitimacy of power, Lammers et al. (2008a) assigned participants to one of four cells in a 2 (powerless, powerful)  $\times$  2 (legitimate, illegitimate) between-participant design. Participants were primed using an essay task developed by Galinsky et al. (2003), where they were randomly assigned to one of four tasks and asked to recall and write about a situation of high- or low-power under legitimate or illegitimate conditions. Participants were then asked to fill out a questioner assessing their behavioral activation/inhibition.

The authors report that under legitimate power conditions, the powerful had higher levels of behavioral activation than did the powerless. That is, under legitimate conditions, “the powerful act while the powerless follow” (Lammers et al., 2008b). However, these trends were reversed in illegitimate power conditions: among participants whose sense of power was illegitimate, low-power led to higher behavioral activation than high-power. In other words, it has been argued that power hierarchies, known to be based on mutual cooperation (Arendt, 1970), may switch to force and resistance when power is perceived as illegitimate (Lanski, 1966; Mills, 2000). Therefore, when studying the behavioral effects of power, legitimacy of the power must be considered. As previously mentioned, we argue that most of the studies on power have been conducted in Western cultures and the results may not generalize to all cultures.

### **Power Distance in Iran**

To shed light on the relation between power and culture, we rely on two of Hofstede’s (1983) cultural dimensions directly related to pro-social behavior: Power Distance and Individualism.

In every society, there are strong forces that maintain and extend existing inequalities. The Power Distance Index measures the extent to which members of society accept these inequalities and allow them to grow (Hofstede, 1983). Hofstede argues that the power distance is supported by the

social environment, culture, and both high and low power members of the society (Hofstede, 2001). Iranians score high on the Power Distance Index (Hofstede, 2001), meaning that people tend to accept a hierarchical order and respect power inequalities.

The Individualism index is a cultural dimension that determines the relation between an individual and other members of society. In countries that score high on the individualistic scale members are expected to look after themselves, whereas in more collectivist countries, members consider themselves as members of a group and work towards fulfilling goals of the group (Hofstede, 1983). A low score in the Individualism index defines Iran as a collectivistic society indicating that people often consider themselves committed to a group, be that their family, friends, or extended relationships. In such a society loyalty to the group is principal and often overrides other social guidelines (Hofstede, 1983).

Another study by Dastmalchian et al. (2001) shows similar results about power and individualism in the Iranian society. This study was conducted as part of the GLOBE project concerning leadership attributions and cultural factors (House, Javidan & Dorfman, 2001). Cultural dimensions of this study are extensions to those defined by Hofstede (1980). Societal collectivism is defined as “the degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action”. Accordingly, in-group collectivism refers to “the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organizations or families” (House et al., 2001). Power distance is measured similar to Hofstede’s definition. Results show that Iranians tend to have relatively high levels of power distance (14<sup>th</sup> out of 61 countries examined) and in-group collectivism (3<sup>rd</sup> out of 61), whereas fairly low levels (13<sup>th</sup> lowest country) of societal collectivism (Dastmalchian, et al., 2001).

Both studies share a common theme; the Iranian society is reported to have high levels of power distance and collectivism; in other words, a society of strongly accepted social hierarchies where high levels of collectivism are reported when members consider others as in-groups, but show highly individualistic behaviors when others are considered out of their “group”. Javidan and Dastmalchian (2003) relate this to the structure of families in Iran, where the father has nearly total power in the family and children are taught from an early age to respect and obey those in position of authority such as their teachers. Due to the strength of families and group structures, behavior is determined by whether others are considered part of the in-group or not.

### **Experiment**

In this experiment, we investigate the extent to which power affects altruistic behavior among Iranians. Previous studies in Western cultures have shown that the powerful demand more and display more act and approach than the powerless,

when power was primed to be legitimate. Whereas, when illegitimate power conditions were experienced, the powerless displayed even more approach than the powerful (Lammers, et al., 2008a). We investigate the interplay between the feeling of low or high power and the perception of legitimacy of that power among Iranian participants in the Dictator's game (Bolton, Katok & Zwick, 1998) described below. Before we discuss the Dictator's game, we layout our three main hypothesis.

In our experiment, participants were asked to recall an experience where they were in a low- or high-power position; the legitimacy of the power involved was left for participants to decide. Through this we achieved a number of goals: before and during the priming stage participants were unaware of the means of the study and that legitimacy was a factor of the study, thus causing less biased responses. Further, by allowing participants to choose the situation they write about, we were able to measure the frequency of each class of responses. Therefore, we manipulated power status and left the legitimacy to be chosen and decided about by the participant. Accordingly, we study how Iranian participants self-assess the legitimacy of their power. Some scholars have linked power to moral hypocrisy, a situation where one imposes stricter moral standards to others than oneself (Lammers, et al., 2010). On the same track we believe that more people in the high-power prime will self-evaluate their actions as legitimate, than their low power counterparts.

**H1:** *Participants under the high-power prime will have a higher tendency to self-evaluate their power as legitimate.*

In collectivist societies, for those who are considered members of the in-group, very high levels of support, altruism and consideration are shown (Hofstede, 1983). This relation especially holds between older and younger members of the group, mainly due to the fact that older members are associated higher levels of power and authority (Javidan, et al., 2003). Accordingly, while high-power members, are highly respected and obeyed, they provide support and caring for others. Javidan and Dastmalchian (2003) also report a high level of desire for generosity and compassion among Iranian managers, a desire that they believe is rooted in the strong culture of family/group collectivism as well as Islamic principles. A view that the powerful should treat subordinates kindly (as their brothers and sisters) is also highly valued in Islamic teachings (Latifi, 1997). The difference between power-classes are exaggerated by the high power distance level in the Iranian society.

On the other hand, Lammers et al. (2008a) demonstrate that conceptualization of power determines its psychological consequences and provides insight into the tendency to approach. Relying on these facts, we hypothesize that, unlike their Western counterparts, when Iranian participants evaluate the power involved in their power prime as legitimate, they will show high levels of generosity and

support towards other participants as they feel a sense of obligation to provide support to the powerless.

**H2:** *Under legitimate power conditions, high-power participants will demand less and show higher levels of altruism compared to low-power participants, as opposed to in illegitimate power conditions.*

Parallel to the above reasoning, we predict that low-power subjects will expect to receive support and consideration from (high-power) others when their sense of power is perceived as legitimate.

**H3:** *Low-power participants who view the power involved in their situation as legitimate will demand more than low-power participants viewing the power as illegitimate.*

This pattern is consistent, but opposite of the reported findings by Lammers, et al., (2008) who show an inverse relation between power and approach when power is perceived as illegitimate. We hypothesize that among Iranian participants, legitimate high power will result in higher concessions than legitimate low power, and the reverse will be resulted for illegitimate power conditions.

## Method

**Participants.** Fifty-two undergraduate students at Sharif University of Technology (24 female, mean age= 21.1) participated in this study. Each participant was ran in a separate session. In return for their participation, they received 4000 Tomans and chance to enter a raffle (play the Dictator's game, explained below).

**Design.** The study employed a  $2 \times 2$  between subject design. The first factor was the power prime (high-power or low-power). The second factor was perceived legitimacy of power (legitimate or illegitimate). The dependent variable was the amount of money taken by the participant in the Dictator's game.

## Procedure

**Priming Stage.** Participants were given a high- or a low-power experiential prime, proven to reliably manipulate the sense of power (Galinsky et al., 2003). Participants were unaware of the aim of the experiment and were told that their essays will be used in a natural language processing project. Those assigned to the high-power condition were instructed to recall a personal incident in which they had power over other individuals, they were asked to write a short essay (in Persian) explaining both the incident and how they felt at that moment. Participants assigned to the low-power condition were similarly instructed to write about a personal incident in which someone else had power over them. A short definition of power was included in the instructions as having the ability to control and influence someone else or being in a position to evaluate them (Galinsky, et al., 2006). After writing the essay, both groups

were asked to evaluate the degree of the legitimacy of the power in the situation they had written about. Specifically, they were asked whether they believed that they were entitled to that powerful or powerless position both lawfully and morally. After completing the power-priming task, the experimenter thanked participants and they were paid 4,000 Tomans. After this stage participants were asked to participate in a raffle as part of the compensation. The raffle was an altered version of the Dictator's game.

**The Dictator's Game.** The Dictator's game (Bolton et al., 1998) is a commonly used game for evaluating levels of altruism and prosocial behavior. In the standard form of the dictator's game, one player (the dictator) is asked to share a fixed amount of money between himself and another participant (the receiver), while both players remain anonymous. According to economic models of decision-making, rational players are expected to maximize their personal benefit. Thus, the dictator should take all the money, leaving nothing for the receiver. Many studies, however, have shown that dictators give between 20%-30% of the money to the unknown receiver (e.g. Camerer, 2011).

For this experiment, we developed a variation of the Dictator's game. As previously mentioned, in the standard form of the game, the dictator is asked to share a fixed amount of money between himself and the receiver. Due to the design of our experiment, we needed all participants to perform the role of the dictator. Hence, participants were instructed to take as much of the money as they want, leaving the rest for future unknown participants. Specifically, in our experiment, subjects were told that they had a chance to participate in a raffle. Each participant was then presented with 5 envelopes that were shuffled in front of her. While the participant did not know how much money was in the envelopes, each contained 10,000 Tomans, in 1,000 Toman bills. Participants were then asked to choose an envelope and take as much money as they want from it. They were told, however, that the same envelopes were to be used for future (unknown) participants; thus, any amount of money they leave in the envelope will be offered to future subjects who choose that same envelope in the raffle. Participants were given complete privacy to take as much of the money as they want. After each session, participants were paid and briefed about the experiment. Then, the envelope chosen by the participant was marked with the participant's ID and put aside. The money taken from the envelopes were used as the main dependent variable in our experiment.

## Results

### Perceived Legitimacy of Power

During the power priming task participants were only instructed to write an essay about a high- or a low-power situation. In this stage nothing was mentioned about the legitimacy of the power involved. After finishing the essay participants were asked to evaluate the power involved in their situation as legitimate or illegitimate. Our findings

show that the state of power had a great impact on this evaluation.

As shown in Figure 1 and consistent with *H1*, we found that 78% of participants (22/28) under a high power prime evaluated their power as legitimate, compared to 33% of participants (8/24) under a low power prime. The difference between these conditions were significant  $\chi^2(1, N = 52) = 9.061, p = .003$ . In other words, 67% of participants reported a sense of injustice when asked to recall a situation of low-power.

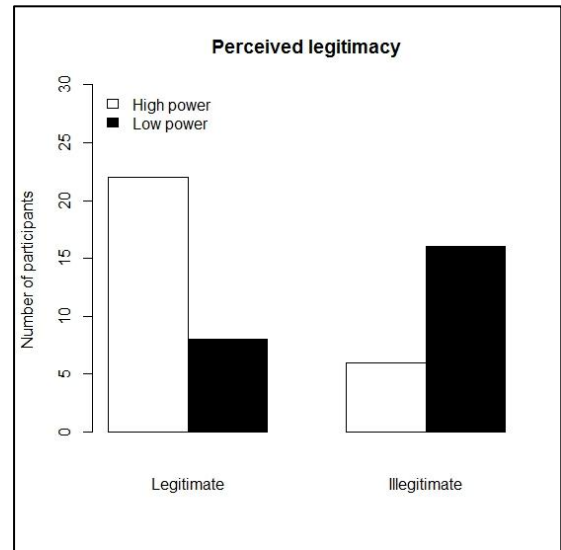


Figure 1: Self-evaluation of legitimacy among participants.

### Altruism

The level of altruism among participants was calculated by the amount of money left in the raffle envelope during the Dictator's game. This is the amount of money that participants decided to leave for future participants. We measured the amount of money taken from the envelope as a numerical indicator of selfishness. In seven cases this number was negative, indicating that participants had left some of the earlier reward money (4,000 Tomans) as well as the money already in the envelope for the next person (note that participants viewed the Dictator's game as part of the compensation). Figure 2 displays the average amount of money taken by participants.

Using the amount of money taken as a dependent variable in a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA, with power (low/high) as the first factor and legitimacy (legitimate/illegitimate) as the second, revealed a significant interaction between power and perceived legitimacy of power  $F(1, 48) = 7.652, p = .008$ .

Under power conditions perceived as legitimate, high-power participants took significantly less money in the Dictator's game ( $M = 2.63, SD = 0.91$ ), than low-power participants ( $M = 6.25, SD = 1.22$ )  $t(28) = 2.14, p = .042$ . Thus, supporting *H2*, our results demonstrate high levels of altruism among the legitimate powerful and naturally higher

demands from the legitimate powerless, who expect to be supported.

When power was perceived as illegitimate, there was significant difference in the amount of money taken by the high-power ( $M = 5, SD = 1.36$ ) as opposed to the low-power ( $M = 2, SD = 0.81$ ) participants  $t(20) = 1.91, p = .071$ . Thus, supporting the second part of *H2*, the illegitimate powerful display declined levels of altruism and more approach, whereas the illegitimate powerless demand less.

Also, there was a significant difference between low-power legitimate and low-power illegitimate conditions  $t(22) = 2.950, p = 0.007$ , with participants in low-power legitimate conditions taking significantly more money than those in the low-power illegitimate condition. This result supports *H3*.

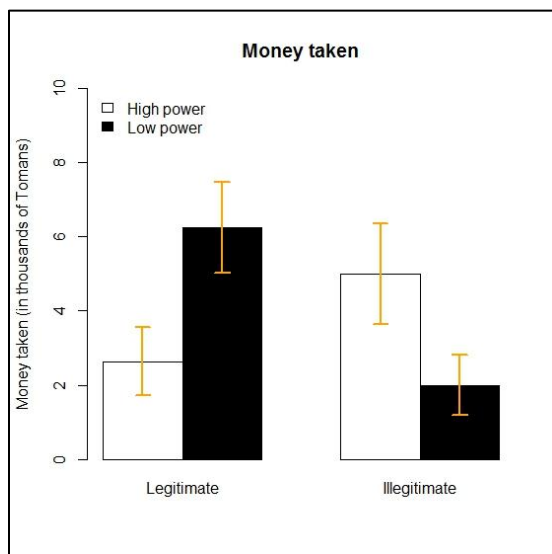


Figure 2: Average money taken in the Dictator's game.

## Discussion

Overall, our results show significantly different patterns than those in similar studies performed among Western participants. Iranian participants relating a situation of high-power, most often found their power to be legitimate. Some participants even used expressions such as *“even though others might think what I did wasn't just, I still believe I did what was right”*. Our results show a consistent pattern, suggesting people often find a way to justify their actions when they stand in a high-power position. Such a claim confirms previous studies showing higher levels of moral hypocrisy among high-power individuals (Lammers, et al., 2010). On the other hand, as previously discussed, most participants under a low-power prime reported the power involved as illegitimate. For example, essays written by this class of participants included expressions such as *“He had no right to do that”* or *“their actions were purely selfish even though they had the legal right”*. In this case our findings contradict prior studies on Western cultures claiming: “decreased power, results in people being less

critical on others and more critical on the self” (Lammers et al., 2010). In other words, low-power situations tend to make Iranian individuals highly critical on the holder of power, often resulting in the powerful being perceived as illegitimate.

One possible explanation for our results, relying on previously proposed features of collectivism amongst Iranians, is that when participants evaluate the power involved in their power prime as legitimate, they are naturally considering others as their in-group. In these circumstances, due to their high levels of collectivism, they become more altruistic. However, when under an illegitimate power prime, others are spontaneously considered as out-groups. In other words, *inside* the group, and where power is perceived as legitimate, the powerless are supported and show higher levels of approach and demand. On the other hand, when power is distributed illegitimately, others are viewed as *outside* the social group, the powerless fail to demand, and fall into an oppressed state similar to social inhibition described by Carver and White (1994). Our results show that in this case, legitimacy has such an effect that people experiencing a state of illegitimate low-power demand less than 1/3 of people in a similar low-power situation but who feel legitimacy in the state. In our future experiments, we plan to explore the interplay between power and in-group/out-group behavior.

Shedding light on the origins of the relation between altruism and high-power behavior among Iranians, begs a deeper discussion of religious and cultural settings. A view that the powerful should treat subordinates kindly (as their brothers and sisters) is highly valued in Islamic teachings (Latifi, 1997). Moreover, some studies suggest that Iranians commonly view their superiors in the same light as their older siblings or parents, describing the relationship between an employee and supervisor close to that of family members; therefore, managers are often expected to show support, generosity and compassion towards subordinates (Latifi, 1997; Tayeb, 1997; Javidan, et al. 2003). A high score on the power distance index further enhances this effect as social hierarchies are mutually accepted and practiced from an early age. Thus, their properties become deep aspects of social behavior.

One must take into account that the question of whether generosity is a pure act or has underlying selfish motives remains an open question. For example, various studies argue that some of the giving is due to the fact that the dictator does not want to seem selfish to the anonymous receivers (Dana, Cain, & Dawes, 2006). In this study, we have not addressed this question; rather, we consider how altruistic behaviors are practiced in the society regardless of fundamental motives. We plan to address such issues in future studies.

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