Relative power and influence strategy: the effects of agent/target organizational power on superiors’ choices of influence strategies

ANIT SOMECH1* AND ANAT DRACH-ZAHAVY2
1Faculty of Education, University of Haifa, Israel
2Faculty of Welfare and Health Studies, University of Haifa, Israel

Summary

The present study examined superiors’ tendency to utilize different top–down influence strategies according to their evaluation of their own power relative to that of their subordinates. Four hundred and fifty-five subordinates (schoolteachers) from different schools described the extent to which their superiors used each item of the influence strategy questionnaire to influence them, while their immediate superiors evaluated superior’s power and subordinate’s power. Overall, superiors tended to use soft and rational strategy more often than hard strategy. However, regarding the parameter of relative power, the results indicated that the agent’s power, as well as the target’s power, affected the superior’s choice of particular influence strategy. The results suggest that power should be discussed in relative rather than absolute terms. Copyright © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

The concepts of power and influence have been the focus of scholarly attention for several decades (cf. French and Raven, 1959; Speakman, 1979). By contrast, research on influence strategies that superiors use to translate power into actual influence is relatively recent (e.g., Venkatesh et al., 1995). Moreover, some researchers have lately suggested that an agent’s choice of a particular influence strategy is based on the evaluation of relative agent/target power (e.g., Fung, 1991). This later current of research provides an important complement to research on power and influence by identifying a variety of influence strategies, and drawing attention to their antecedents and consequences (Venkatesh et al., 1995). Our purpose was to build on the contributions of this later current, which has not received due attention.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to examine the parameter of relative agent/target power as affecting the agent’s choice of a particular influence behavior. More specifically, it was to

*Correspondence to: Anit Somech, Faculty of Education, University of Haifa, Haifa 31905, Israel.
E-mail: anits@construct.haifa.ac.il

Received 10 September 2000
Accepted 21 May 2001
Copyright © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
Published online 13 December 2001
investigate the tendency of superiors to utilize different influence strategies according to their evaluation of their own power relative to that of their subordinates.

Power and influence behavior

Power and influence behavior have been viewed as discrete. Power is typically defined as the inferred potential of one person (the agent) to cause another person (the target) to act in accordance with the agent’s wishes (Bass, 1990); whereas influence behavior is typically defined as the agent’s actual behavior, which causes behavioral or attitudinal change in the target (Raven and Rubin, 1983; Stahelski and Paynton, 1995).

Concerning power, French and Raven’s typology (French and Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965, 1993; Raven and Rubin, 1983) has been among the most popular approaches to the conceptualization of the bases of power in interpersonal influence. They introduced a five-fold categorization of sources of power: (1) coercive power, which stems from the agent’s ability to punish the target or to prevent him or her from obtaining desired rewards; (2) reward power, which refers to the agent’s capacity to reward the target for desirable behavior; (3) legitimate power, which is based on the agent’s formal authority, and refers to perceptions about the prerogatives, obligations, and responsibilities associated with particular positions in organization or social system; (4) expert power, which arises from the attribution of expertise, ability, or knowledge to the influencing agent; and (5) referent power, which arises when the target person identifies with the influencing agent. In an organization, power is derived from the opportunities inherent in the person’s position (including legitimate power, coercive power, and reward power), as well as from personal and interpersonal attributes (including referent power and expert power) (Yukl, 1989).

Concerning influence behavior, until recently, most influence research focused on a tactic-by-tactic examination of influence (e.g., Erez and Rim, 1982; Kipnis et al., 1980; Schriesheim and Hinkin, 1990; Yukl and Falbe, 1991). However, some researchers have suggested that certain meta-categories of influence tactics may reflect their strategic use by individuals (e.g., Barry and Shapiro, 1992; Berger, 1985; Kipnis and Schmidt, 1985). In synthesizing their steam-of-influence research, Kipnis and Schmidt (1985) distinguished three main categories of influence behavior: hard strategy, rational strategy, and soft strategy.

Hard strategy may be described as the means whereby the agent expects compliance to be gained (Miller, 1983). It may be through direct assertive requests for compliance, or mediated through manipulative threats and aggression. The former means is generally associated with legitimate power.

Rational strategy involves the application of bargaining and logic. It consists of the agent’s appeal or attempt to elicit instrumental reasoning by the target. The object is to offer the target a course of action (complying with the influence request) that will presumably maximize the expected value of some outcome important to the target. This type of strategy may be conceptualized within utility or expectancy frameworks to gain what is desired (Farmer et al., 1997; Jacobs, 1970; Tedeschi et al., 1973).

Soft strategy is said to be invoked when the agent seeks compliance in a polite, friendly, or humble manner by flattering and sympathizing with the influence target. Soft strategy involves a less aggressive and more psychological means of influence (Neale and Northcraft, 1991), and is designed to secure a target’s volitional compliance.

Two theories of social processes appear especially relevant for clarifying how power and influence behavior relate, and explaining how managers vary their use of influence strategies with subordinates. The first approach is the work on role-making processes between a leader and an individual subordinate.
(Lowin and Craig, 1968; Wayne et al., 1997). This line of research stressed that employees are not simply passive, but are proactive participants engaged in active efforts to alter their work environment (Emerson, 1962; Lowin and Craig, 1968). Therefore, to develop an informed understanding of managers’ influence behavior we must embrace the dynamic aspects of the context, and realize that subordinates are active players in shaping reality and influencing decisions (Ferris and Judge, 1991; Wayne et al., 1997). In line with this logic, it is not sufficient to focus primarily on the influencing agent, as previous power literature tended to do (e.g., Kanter, 1979; Koslowsky and Schwarzwald, 1993); research should also examine the power of the target of influence, following essentially the same basic framework (Raven, 1993). In the present study we focused on both the power of the agent and the power of the target.

To bridge a gap between power and influence behavior, the other approach—social exchange theory—attempts to explain how power is gained and lost in reciprocal influence processes between leaders and followers. Social relations commonly entail ties of mutual dependence between the parties. A depends upon B if A aspires to goals or gratifications whose achievement is facilitated by appropriate actions on B’s part. By virtue of mutual dependency, it is more or less imperative for each party that (s)he be able to control or influence the other’s conduct. At this point, these ties of mutual dependence imply that each party is in a position, to some degree, to grant or deny, facilitate or hinder, the other’s gratifications (Cotton, 1976; Emerson, 1962). Therefore, it seems likely that the bases of power of both parties, the agent and the target, will shape the degree of the mutual dependency.

To sum up, because both agent’s power and target’s power affect outcomes, power should be defined in relative rather than absolute terms (Yu1, 1989). An agent’s choice of a particular influence strategy will be based on his or her evaluation of the differences in relative agent/target power (Perreault and Miles, 1978; Raven, 1993; Stahelski and Paynton, 1995; Tjosvold et al., 1992; Yu1, 1989). The agent might choose a soft or a rational strategy to influence a low-power subordinate, because a weak subordinate knows himself or herself to be so, and there is no need for the superior to wield the iron fist. By contrast, the agent might choose a hard strategy to influence a high-power subordinate, because he or she will not want to appear weak before a high-power subordinate, who could be seen as a potential threat.

A review of the empirical literature revealed that although power is typically well defined, most research focused on the agent’s potential power (e.g., Kanter, 1977, 1979; Koslowsky and Schwarzwald, 1993; Mowday, 1978). For example, Koslowsky and Schwarzwald (1993) suggested that higher-status superiors typically have more power and greater control of resources than lower-status superiors. Therefore, higher-status agents tend to choose strategies indicating control over resources (hard strategies), and that lower-status agents tend to choose those indicating low resource control (soft strategies). On the basis of a series of studies, Kipnis (1976) concluded that managers, who are very powerful, possessing more legitimate authority, more resources under their control, and/or more resources of critical information, are more frequently tempted to use hard strategies.

Nevertheless, only few studies have examined the agent’s choice of a particular influence strategy as determined by the interaction of agent and target characteristics. These studies referred to power differentiation, mainly through formal status differences, as the relative authority accorded by the formal organization to the agent/target people: equal power of peer relationships; unequal power of superior–subordinate, or subordinate–superior (Forsyth, 1990; Stahelski and Paynton, 1995; Yu1 and Falbe, 1991). For example, Yu1 and his colleagues (Yu1 and Falbe, 1991; Yu1 and Tracey, 1992) and Frost and Stahelski (Frost and Stahelski, 1988; Stahelski et al., 1989), who addressed this issue empirically, found that the use of influence strategies might vary according to the relative status of the agent and the target (superior, subordinate, or peer). Fung (1991) investigated downward versus upward influence strategy, and found that superiors used a hard strategy, consisting of higher authority and sanctions, toward subordinates; whereas subordinates used a soft strategy, consisting of friendliness and ingratitude, toward superiors.
These findings raised the question of whether low-power superiors who attempt to influence high-power subordinates are in essentially the same position as subordinates who attempt to influence superiors (e.g., Wayne et al., 1997). It could be speculated that although formal status is an essential determinant of potential power in an organization, it is only one determinant of a person’s power. Power is derived not only from the opportunities inherent in the person’s position in the organization (including legitimate power, coercive power, and reward power), but also depends on personal and interpersonal attributes (including referent power and expert power).

In sum, the scope of the present study was to investigate the effect of relative agent/target power in the agent’s choice of a particular influence strategy.

In line with the discussed literature our hypotheses were:

*Hypothesis 1: The effects of agent’s power.* High-power superiors will more often use hard strategy with subordinates than low-power superiors; low-power superiors will use soft and rational strategies more often than high-power superiors.

*Hypothesis 2: The effects of target’s power.* Superiors will use hard strategy more often with low-power subordinates than with high-power subordinates; superiors will use soft and rational strategies more often with high-power subordinates than with low-power subordinates.

*Hypothesis 3: The interaction between agent’s power and target’s power.*

(a) High-power superiors will use hard strategies more often with high-power subordinates than with low-power subordinates; and they will use soft and rational strategy more often with low-power subordinates than with high-power subordinates.

(b) Low-power superiors, who have limited power, are limited in their repertoire of available influence strategies to soft strategy, regardless of subordinate’s level of power.

**Organizational Context**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four hundred and fifty-five elementary schools were recruited randomly throughout Israel. About 70 per cent of the subordinates and 60 per cent of the superiors were female. Almost all the schools reported undergoing significant change in structure and work design, mostly towards teamwork. Over 80 per cent of schools reported greater decentralization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Workplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Israeli educational system is currently undergoing reform movement towards site-based management. However, all educational staff at the elementary school level are state employees. Thus, the Ministry of Education is responsible for hiring and placing teachers, principals, and inspectors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The unique characteristics of the Israeli work culture are typified by low individualism, small power distance, and strong traditions of democratic and cooperative ideologies coupled with informal participative leadership styles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The study was conducted between 1998 and 1999.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Method

Sample and procedure

Altogether, 455 schoolteachers from different schools in Israel participated in the study during a training programme. About 70 per cent of the participants were female (317 women and 138 men); their average age was 33, with a seniority average of 9.5 years. Seventy-one per cent held a Bachelor’s degree, 17 per cent a Master’s degree, and 12 per cent a ‘professional’ degree (equivalent to junior college diploma, with teaching credentials). These teachers described their immediate superiors, with whom they had worked for at least six months. These principals were both male ($n = 185$) and female ($n = 270$), with average age 38, and seniority average of 10.8 years. Seventy-seven per cent held a Bachelor’s degree, 23 per cent a Master’s degree. These demographic characteristics were similar to those found in comparable studies on teachers and principals in Israel (Rosenblatt and Somech, 1998).

Data were collected through two questionnaires. The superior’s influence strategy questionnaire was completed by subordinates, according to Yukl’s (1989) recommendation. In contrast to most research, which relied on the perceptions of superiors in their description of the influence tactics that they themselves used, Yukl suggested that studying subordinates’ perceptions of the leader’s behavior may be most useful in examining linkages between influence tactics and attributions of power. Accordingly, following the advice of Podsakoff and Organ (1986), to avoid same-source bias we surveyed superiors (principals) to evaluate superior/subordinate power. In addition, the two samples were asked to provide demographic information.

Measures

Power scale
To measure superior’s power and subordinate’s power, the 5-item scale of Bachman et al. (1966) was used. The items reflected French and Raven’s (1959) five bases of social power. To measure the superior’s power, superiors were asked to indicate the perceived extent to which they possessed various resources of power. To assess the subordinate’s power, superiors were asked to indicate the extent to which the target possessed various resources of power.

The superiors’/subordinates’ power score was obtained by the mean response to the five items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) ‘strongly disagree’ to (5) ‘strongly agree’. We used the mean response index because several scholars (e.g., Schriesheim et al., 1991; Yukl, 1989) have criticized the discriminant validity of French and Raven’s (1959) five bases of power.

Influence strategies scale
To measure strategies used by superiors to influence their subordinates, we adapted Kipnis et al.’s (1980) influence strategy questionnaire, which was specifically adjusted and tested to suit the given context (an educational setting). For this purpose, relevant items were selected from Kipnis et al.’s questionnaire, along with additional items generated for their direct relevance for the educational setting. Before the questionnaire was administered, it was pilot-tested and validated. The questionnaire contained 28 items classified into hard, rational, and soft strategies (Kipnis and Schmidt, 1985):

Hard strategy. Assertiveness (three items) comprised demanding, ordering, and setting deadlines—for example, ‘Uses his/her authority to ensure that I accomplish my duties’. Sanctions (two items) comprised the use of administrative sanctions to induce compliance—for example, ‘Gains my
obedience through sanctions’. Upward appeal (two items) referred to tactics generating additional pressure for conformity by invoking the influence of higher levels in the organization. A sample item was ‘Makes a formal appeal to higher levels to back up his request’. Coalitions (two items) described the use of steady pressure for compliance by obtaining the support of subordinates—for example, ‘Obtains the support of a group of teachers to back up his/her request’.

**Rational strategy.** Rationality (six items) involved the use of facts and logic to support the objective merit of what is wanted—for example, ‘Presents me with information in support of his/her point of view’. Exchange (five items) referred to the promise and/or delivery of a desired commodity in return for compliance—for example, ‘States or implies that those who comply with him/her will be rewarded’.

**Soft strategy.** Ingratiation (eight items) involved the use of flattery and ingratiating—for example, ‘Inflates the importance of what he/she wants me to do’.

Subordinates used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) never to (5) always to assesses the frequency with which their superior used each strategy to influence them.

Next, a varimax rotation factor analysis of the 28 items was conducted, to check for their convergent and discriminant validity (see Table 1). All items of a scale should load strongly on a single factor to demonstrate convergent validity, and weakly on other factors to meet the requirements of discriminant validity (Venkatesh et al., 1995). All items with a loading higher than 0.40 on a factor were summarized into one construct, so only two distinct factors emerged. Interestingly, items capturing rational and soft influence strategies loaded on the same factor. Therefore, these items were combined to represent one construct of rational and soft strategy. Factor 2 appeared to capture all the items referring to the hard strategy subscale.

**Results**

Based on the factor analysis results given above, all the following analyses referred to two distinctive influence strategies: hard strategy, and rational and soft strategy. Moreover, between the hard strategy and the rational and soft strategy no significant correlation was found ($p > 0.05$), indicating further support for the existence of two independent constructs of influence strategy.

Note that these results concurred only partially with Kipnis and Schmidt’s (1985) typology of influence strategy. Several other investigators have also reported the existence of different influence strategies combinations (e.g., Venkatesh et al., 1995). It would be inappropriate to infer from the present results that Kipnis and Schmidt’s taxonomy has been refuted. Rather the use of influence strategy seems to be contextually contingent. In other words, Kipnis and Schmidt’s approach provides a framework for available influence strategies, but in a specific context the three factors may interrelate in different patterns or not be pertinent (Koslowsky and Schwarzwald, 1993). For example, Cheng (1983) showed in his research that individuals working in a rational organizational climate more frequently employed rational tactics, and those working in a political climate tended more frequently to employ political tactics such as ingratiating or threat. From his findings, Cheng concluded the use of particular strategy is a function of the context of the organization of which an individual is a part.

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the two agent’s influence strategies according to the agent’s power and the target’s power. The means patterns revealed that superiors generally tended to rational and soft strategy more often that to hard strategy. The results of the paired $t$-test revealed that the difference was significant ($t = 15.9$, $p < 0.0001$).
Table 1. Factor analysis of influence strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rational and soft strategy</td>
<td>Hard strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My superior:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers to help me, in exchange for doing what he/she wants (exchange)</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invites me to participate in professional training, in exchange for doing what he/she wants (exchange)</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers to provide me incentives for agreeing to his/her suggestions (exchange)</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts in a friendly manner prior to asking me what he/she wants (ingratiation)</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States or implies that those who comply with him/her will be rewarded (exchange)</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks me in a polite way (ingratiation)</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflates the importance of what he/she wants me to do (ingratiation)</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explains the reasons for his/her request (rationality)</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sympathizes with me about the added problems that his/her request has caused (ingratiation)</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presents me with information in support of his/her point of view (rationality)</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses logic to convince me (rationality)</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presents a detailed plan that justifies his/her ideas (rationality)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes me feel important (ingratiation)</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows his/her need for my help (ingratiation)</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praises me (ingratiation)</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writes a memo that describes what he/she wants (rationality)</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waits until I appear in a receptive mood before asking (ingratiation)</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminds me of past favors that he/she did for me (exchange)</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuades me to accept his/her opinion through logical arguments (rationality)</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtains the support of a group of teachers to back up his/her request (coalitions)</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not tolerate any exceptions to the rules (assertiveness)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses his/her authority to ensure that I accomplish my duties (assertiveness)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes a formal appeal to higher levels to back up his/her request (upward appeal)</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtains the informal support of higher-ups (upward appeal)</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses threats to gain compliance (sanctions)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses his/her authority to promote the organization’s objectives (assertiveness)</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has me come to a formal conference at which he/she makes his/her request (coalitions)</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gains my obedience through sanctions (sanctions)</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To examine the effects of agent’s power and target’s power on influence strategy, two-way ANOVA analyses were performed, when power was treated as a continuous variable (see summarized results in Table 3, and Figure 1). The results demonstrated a main effect of agent’s power, and an interaction effect, but not significant effect of subordinate’s power, for both strategies (hard strategy, and rational and soft strategy).

The results supported Hypothesis 1: high-power superiors used hard strategy with subordinates more often than low-power superiors; low-power superiors used rational and soft strategy more often than high-power superiors.

There were no significant main effects of target’s power on either the hard strategy or the rational and soft strategy $(p > 0.05)$, so the results did not support Hypothesis 2. Superiors did not use hard strategy with low-power subordinates more often than with high-power subordinates; and did not use rational and soft strategy with high-power subordinates more often than with low-power subordinates.
Table 2. Means and standard deviations for influence strategy scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Low-power subordinate</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>High-power subordinate</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hard strategy</td>
<td>Rational and soft strategy</td>
<td>Hard strategy</td>
<td>Rational and soft strategy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-power superior</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-power superior</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>129</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. High and low power was determined by median scores.

Table 3. Results of two-way analysis of variance of influence strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variance</th>
<th>Hard strategy</th>
<th>Rational and soft strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean square</td>
<td>df</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent’s power</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target’s power</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent power × target power</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third hypothesis predicted an interaction effect (agent’s power × target’s power) on influence strategy for the high-power agent only. The findings of the analyses indicated a significant effect of agent’s power × target’s power on influence strategies. Post hoc analyses showed that low-power superiors used the hard strategy more often with low-power subordinates than with high-power subordinates, whereas they used rational and soft strategy more often with high-power subordinates than with low-power subordinates.

Concerning high-power superiors, the results indicated that they used hard strategy more often with high-power subordinates than with low-power subordinates, whereas they used rational and soft strategy more often with low-power subordinates than with high-power subordinates. Hence, the findings supported Hypothesis 3. High-power superiors relied on hard strategy more with high-power subordinates than with low-power subordinates, and on rational and soft strategy more with low-power subordinates than with high-power subordinates.

Discussion

The present study addressed the issue of power and influence in organizations. Most previous studies focused on the agent’s potential power, using it as a predictor of the agent’s choice of a
Figure 1. The interactions of superior power and subordinate power on influence strategies (\(\cdot\), low-power superiors; \(\cdot\cdot\cdot\), high power superiors)

particular influence strategy. This study complemented that aspect by examining the agent’s choice of influence strategy as a consequence of relative agent/target power. Our results highlighted the importance of studying power and influence behavior in relative rather than absolute terms, and contribute to the current literature in several aspects.

First, consistent with earlier research (e.g., Boyle et al., 1992; Venkatesh et al., 1995) our results indicated that superiors generally tended to use rational and soft strategy more often than hard strategy; that is, they influenced subordinates by less aggressive and more instrumental and psychological means. This pattern is probably due to managers’ reluctance to use strategies that can be socially costly, namely create an unfavorable impression or provoke retaliation from the target of influence in an ongoing relationship (Venkatesh et al., 1995). Moreover, this tendency may in some way be evinced in the current shifts in power distribution in many organizations. As organizations have downsized and flattened to meet the demands of competitive environments, the distribution of power between superiors and subordinates has been changing. Employees have been ‘empowered’, with more decision-making authority vested in lower-level employees (Cotton, 1993).

Secondly, observing exclusively either the agent’s power or the target’s power produced results consistent with previous studies (e.g., Venkatesh et al., 1995). As for the agent’s power, the results
demonstrated that more powerful superiors tended to use hard strategy with their subordinates more often than less powerful superiors did; less powerful superiors made greater use of rational and soft strategy than more powerful superiors did. Superiors were found not to consider target’s power when they chose a particular strategy to affect their subordinates. Hence, in respect of the agent’s power or the target’s power separately, it could be speculated that the former shapes the choice of influence strategies more strongly than the latter. Namely, managers make greater use of influence strategies that correspond to their own bases of power than to their subordinates’.

The present study contributed to formulating a conceptualization of relative power. Indeed, the interaction of agent’s and target’s characteristics on influence behavior proved to effect a more complex pattern of behavior. The results demonstrated that superiors took relative agent/target power into consideration, so their choices of influence strategies varied accordingly: low-power superiors used hard strategy more often with low-power subordinates than with high-power subordinates, while they used rational and soft strategy more often with high-power subordinates than with low-power subordinates.

In contrast, when superiors and subordinates were both powerful, superiors relied more on hard strategy, consisting of higher authority and sanctions. It seems that managers tended to react according to the ‘iron law of power’ (Shapira, 1995), and to rely more on hard strategy instead of sharing power to accomplish organizational objectives. However, with less powerful subordinates superiors tended to use ‘weaker’ strategy, consisting of rational and soft tactics.

Our results may contribute to the debate in the literature on how unequal power will affect the influence strategies used by more rather than less powerful managers. One line of research (e.g., Kanter, 1977, 1979) proposed that more powerful managers are more helpful and more supportive of their subordinates than less powerful managers are. They have the confidence as well as the ability to help and influence their subordinates by softer strategies. However, on the basis of a series of studies, Fung (1991), Kipnis (1976), and Tjosvold et al. (1992) concluded that managers who are very powerful are frequently tempted to use their power coercively. This directive influence induces powerful leaders to conclude that they can control their subordinates.

The present study may help somewhat to reconcile these conflicting positions by incorporating relative agent/target power. Consistent with Kanter’s findings, high-power superiors used rational and soft strategy more often with low-powered subordinates than with high-power subordinates. However, consistent with the results of Kipnis and others, with high-power subordinates, high-power superiors tended more often to use hard strategy than they did with low-power subordinates. Therefore, from the results of this study, we suggest that relative agent/target power rather than agent’s absolute power can provide a more comprehensive understanding of leaders’ influence behavior.

This study may well serve to encourage researchers to focus more attention on characteristics of both agent and target as related to influence strategy. Although, in the present research we focused on French and Raven’s (1959) bases of power, there are of course other sources of power that could be considered. For example, Bartol and Martin (1988) assessed power as a composite of objective sources of dependency (e.g., task uncertainty, performance visibility) and subjective sources of dependency (e.g., career goals, motivational need). Further research should explore how these dependencies are related to the choice of particular influence strategy. Moreover, the extent to which the agent possesses a certain base of power arguably depends on the target he or she is trying to influence. That means that the degree to which an agent has a certain power base seems to depend on the compared other (i.e., the target). Future research could examine this argument by adopting a dyad design.

Finally, the results of this study are of course limited by the operations. First, The data were self-reported and subject to biases, although recent research suggests that self-reported data are not as limited as commonly believed (e.g., Alper et al., 1998; Balzer and Suls, 1992). Moreover, the present study adopted Yukl’s (1989) recommendation and relied on subordinates’ perceptions of superiors’
influence behavior, in contrast to most research, which relied on the perceptions of superiors in their
description of the influence tactics that they themselves used. Clearly, attributions about individuals
are made on the basis of perceived (and not ‘objective’) behavior, and these attributions may differ
considerably between agent and target (Bass, 1990; DePaulo et al., 1987). However, further research
might include more objective methods (e.g., observations) for assessing power and influence strategy.
Second, the cross-sectional design of the present study raises the issue of causality. It is difficult to
determine the nature of the relationship between power and influence strategy. Is power a determinant
or a consequence of influence strategy? For example, the tendency of a superior more often to use a
hard strategy may encourage subordinates to perceive the superior’s power in a certain way. Therefore,
longitudinal studies using more objective criteria are clearly required to explore the nature of these
relationships further.

Summary and Conclusions

This study addressed the concepts of power and influence behavior. If successfully replicated, our
results may have several important implications.

First, theoretically they suggest that power should be discussed in relative rather than absolute
terms. These are the agent’s potential influence over the target person deriving from agent’s and tar-
get’s power, and the agent–target relationship.

Secondly, the present results suggest that in practice the choice of what tactics are appropriate is not
just a matter of common sense. Managers should learn how to identify appropriate tactics to influence
their subordinates according to agent/target characteristics. Training programmes ought to equip
superiors with management techniques, which will prepare them to utilize a varied repertoire of influ-
ence strategies according to changing circumstances (Bolman and Deal, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1991).

Author biographies

Anit Somech is a lecturer of Organizational Behavior at the Faculty of Education, University of Haifa,
Israel. Her research focuses on two major areas: administration and leadership, and work motivation.
Specifically, she investigates (a) micropolitics in organizations—influence strategies of managers, and
(b) team work—extra-role behavior at the individual, team, and organizational level.

Anat Drach-Zahavy is a lecturer of Organizational Psychology at the Faculty of Welfare and Health
studies, University of Haifa, Israel. Her primary research interests concerns the link between team’s
structures, values, and practices and team’s outcomes.

References

Alper S, Tjosvold D, Law KS. 1998. Interdependence and controversy in group decision making: antecedents of
Bachman JG, Smith CG, Slesinger JA. 1966. Control, performance, and satisfaction: an analysis of structural and


