

Supervisory Bases of Power and Attitude Change:

The Role of Cultural Orientation

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Abstract

Drawing on the most often-cited power taxonomy (French & Raven, 1959), the theory of attitude change (Kelman, 1958), and the cross-cultural management and leadership literature (Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010; Triandis, 1995), we tested a hypothesis by means of field experiment that cultural orientation moderates the effect of power bases on attitude change. Using a sample of 194 managers from Malaysian manufacturing organizations, we implemented a 7 X 2 between-participants full-factorial design to examine on the relative effectiveness (compliance and commitment) of the effect of power bases as a manipulated variable (reward, coercion, legitimate, expert, referent, information, and connection) and cultural orientation as a subject variable (high/low on power distance and collectivism). The analysis indicated that cultural orientation serves as a boundary condition of social power effectiveness. Thus, aspiring leaders need to be aware that their power profile is associated with the degree of their employee cultural orientation.

Keywords: bases of power, compliance, commitment, cultural orientation

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“Power is the opportunity to build, to create, to nudge history in a different direction”

-- Richard Nixon

“In a gentle way, you can shake the world”

--Mahatma Gandhi

The role of culture in leadership effectiveness has been of interest to organizational researchers since the seminal work by Hofstede (1980) up until more recently the massive data provided by the GLOBE studies (House & Aditya, 1997; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). As well within-country cultural variations have intrigued leadership researchers (e.g., Triandis, 1995) at the individual level. Nonetheless, the importance of culture at the individual level seems to have diminished as a result of the greater importance attached to culture at the national level. Thus the primary purpose of this study is to examine the role of culture at the individual level by means of two widely studied cultural values—power distance and collectivism—in explaining bases of power effectiveness.

While examining the role of individualized cultural orientation, we contribute to the existing social power and cross-cultural leadership literature in two distinctive ways. First, while the relationship between power bases and work outcomes has been tested in the past (see such excellent reviews as those of Ansari, 1990; Podsakoff & Schriesheim, 1985; Yukl, 2013), we are aware of no systematic research that has addressed the role of cultural orientation of individual subordinates in this relationship. Thus we include employee cultural orientation as a boundary condition of bases of power. Stated differently, we attempt at blending the three constructs—

power bases, attitude change, and cultural orientation—in a single theoretical model. Second, most studies that have examined the relationship between power bases and work outcomes were conducted in the West. Our study contributes to the leadership literature by testing the effect of power bases along with the role of individual employee cultural orientation as a boundary condition in a contrastingly different milieu--the Malaysian context.

Theory and Hypothesis

Social power is defined as the ability to influence or “influence potential” (Ansari, 1990; Fiol, O’Connor, & Aguinis, 2001; French & Raven, 1959). According to Fiol et al. (2001), “power is fundamentally a social construction that is perceptual in nature” (2001, p. 224). “Simply perceiving that an individual has power to affect oneself helps create the reality of that power, insofar as one’s beliefs, intentions, and actions change as a result of that perception” (Farmer & Aguinis, 2005, p. 1069). The consequences of power are experienced at every level of social organization but are most extensively experienced in formal organizations at all levels of the hierarchy. Many different schemes of power typology (i.e., power bases) are available to understand why and the extent to which an individual may be perceived as being powerful (Etzioni, 1961; Peabody, 1962). But, the taxonomy proposed by French and Raven (1959) seems to be the most often-cited power taxonomy. In their original classification, French and Raven identified five bases of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert power. Subsequently, Raven (1965) later added a sixth base of power—that is, information power. Other researchers added a seventh power base: connection power (Ansari, 1990; Bhal & Ansari, 1996; Hersey, Blanchard, & Natemeyer, 1979, Howell & Costley, 2000). A power base is a source of influence in social relationships (Ansari, 1990). A brief description of these seven power bases is given below.

- *Reward power* is based on a subordinate's perception that a supervisor has the ability to provide desired tangible or intangible outcomes.
- *Coercive power* is based on a subordinate's perception that a supervisor has the ability to issue punishments.
- *Legitimate power* is based on a subordinate's perception that that a supervisor has the right to give orders and there is an obligation to comply with those orders.
- *Referent power* is based on an identification with or desire to be associated with the supervisor.
- *Expert power* is based on a subordinate's perception that the supervisor possesses special knowledge or skills.
- *Information power* is based on a subordinate's perception that the supervisor has the ability to control the availability and accuracy of information.
- *Connection power* is based on a subordinate's perception that the supervisor is well connected with other powerful individuals within and outside the organization.

Several studies have been conducted to compare and contrast the effects of using different bases of power. The findings of these studies are well-summarized in the past reviews (Ansari, 1990); Podsakoff & Schriesheim, 1985; Yukl, 981). Some clear trends are apparent in those study findings. Two personal bases of power—referent and expert—are positively associated with greater satisfaction and higher performance, and less absenteeism and turnover. The use of legitimate and coercive power is unrelated or negatively related to work outcomes. The use of reward power has no clear trend across various studies.

We believe that the effectiveness of power bases can also be examined within the framework of Kelman's (1958, 2006) three processes of attitude change. Kelman distinguished among the

three processes as follows: *Compliance* is acceptance of influence due to a desire to gain rewards and avoid punishments from the immediate supervisor, *identification* portrays acceptance of influence to maintain satisfying relationship with the immediate supervisor, and *internalization* is acceptance of influence through a perceived congruence between individual's personal values and the values exemplified by his or her immediate supervisor (Vandenberg, Self, & Seo, 1994). Using Kelman's three processes of attitude change, we believe that power bases will have different outcomes for employees with different cultural orientations. In other words, we suggest that individualized cultural orientation serves as a boundary condition of bases of power effectiveness—an argument we next turn to develop.

Culture is defined as an acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior in terms of shared socially constructed environments and commonly experienced events including the history, language, and religion of their members (Schein, 1992; Triandis, 1972). Stated precisely, it is “the collective mental programming of the people in an environment” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 16). Hofstede advocated cultural values to have a significant impact on leadership and organizational behavior. He was undoubtedly the earliest to identify four value dimensions that distinguished national cultures: power distance, individualism *vs.* collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity *vs.* femininity. Subsequently, Bond (1988) introduced the fifth dimension—long-term *vs.* short-term orientation—to the list.

It should be noted that “when theories regarding culture are tested within one country, researchers must determine the extent to which within country variance exists on cultural dimensions and whether this variance is adequate for hypothesis testing” (Howell, Dorfman, & Clugston, 2000, p. 7). Researchers are advised to give due attention to intercultural encounters and not merely assume comparison across cultural groups is reflective of a group's cultural

values (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007). For example, according to Hofstede (1980), the US is primarily an individualist country, but other cross-cultural researchers (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997; Triandis, 1995) have noted a great deal of within-country variability along cultural dimensions in the US. To clarify the phenomenon of within-country variability at the individual level, Triandis (1995) has made the distinction between the *culture level* classification of collectivism and individualism, and the individual or *psychological level* classification. Given this perspective, it has been suggested that individualized measures of culture must be used when culture is an independent or moderator variable predicting any individually measured dependent variables (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994). More recent evidence (Taras et al., 2010) also suggests that values predict outcomes with similar strength at the individual level of analysis as they do at the national level.

In line with the above arguments we expect that, within the Malaysian culture, individuals will vary considerably on measures of cultural dimensions. We chose the two most widely-studied cultural values in this study (i.e., collectivism and power distance) at the individual level (Triandis, 1995; Triandis et al., 1988). Power distance refers to the extent to which subordinates can express disagreement with their supervisor, whereas collectivism is defined as a tendency of people to belong to groups or collectives and to look after each other in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede, 1980).

Though national culture can influence the effectiveness of leadership (Hofstede, 1980; Shamir & Howell, 1999), culture at the individual level (i.e., individual cultural orientation) can and do influence leadership effectiveness in meaningful ways. For example, Jung and Avolio (1999) provided experimental evidence that transactional leadership had stronger positive influence on subordinate performance with individualist orientation than with collectivist

orientation, whereas transformational leadership had stronger positive influence on subordinate performance with collectivist orientation than with individualist orientation. In line with this study and Hofstede's conceptualization of power distance and collectivism, we state the following hypothesis for empirical verification:

Employee cultural orientation moderates the effectiveness of supervisor's bases of power, such that the positive effect of bases of power will be stronger for employees with high power distance and high collectivism orientation than for those with low power distance and low collectivism orientation.

Method

Research Site, Participants, and Procedure

We included in our research site eight semi-conductors (47.9%) and electronics (52.1%) organizations located in northern Malaysia. Out of 500 experimental material distributed to full-time employees, we received usable responses from 194 employees (a response rate of 38.8%). In order to protect the confidentiality of responses, participants were asked to return their completed responses directly to the researchers in sealed envelopes. Their demographic profile was as follows:

Participants were mostly in the age range of 25 to 40 years ($M = 31.8$; $SD = 6.12$). There were approximately 60% female participants. In terms of ethnicity, 44.8% participants were Chinese, followed by 36.2% Malay, and 18% Indian. About half of them were diploma holder and high school graduates (46.6%), and the remaining were degree holders. The average tenure with organization was 5.63 years ($SD = 4.04$). About 50% of them represented the middle level of management. In order to provide evidence against response bias, we compared the demographic profile of early respondents with those of late respondents. The analysis revealed

no significant difference ($p > .05$) on any of the demographic items. A comparison in terms of the dependent measures also showed no significant difference ($p > .05$) on mean values of early and late responses.

Experimental Design and Procedure

We implemented a 7 X 2 between-participants full-factorial design including two factors: bases of social power (seven conditions: reward, coercion, legitimate, referent, expert, information, and connection) and employees cultural orientations (two conditions: high/low power distance and collectivism). The first factor was a manipulated variable and the second one was a subject variable. Since the first factor was a manipulated variable, we employed seven versions of a scenario, each representing a particular experimental treatment. We used between-participants design as opposed to a within-participants design to avoid any potential contrast biases that may occur if the same study participant is asked to provide information on all treatment conditions. Specifically, asking the same participants to respond to all conditions may exaggerate differences between them due to contrast effects (Aguinis, 2009; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). An additional advantage of using a between-participants design is that some participants respond to one stimulus, whereas others respond to a different stimulus. In consequence, although all participants are exposed to the same dependent measures, they are exposed to different stimuli, which reduces the threat that common-source variance may affect the study's results (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012).

Experimental Manipulation

We provided the participants with a three-section experimental material. The manipulation of bases of power was done through a vignette. After reading a complete vignette,

the participants were asked to respond to the dependent measures (Section 1) and demographic (Section 2) as well as cultural orientation (Section 3) measures.

Based on the conceptual definitions of bases of power (mentioned earlier), power manipulation scenario read as follows:

“Your job is to assist your immediate superior in making sure that your department functions smoothly. In handling your day-to-day responsibilities, you have encountered complicated problems that may affect your department's effectiveness. You already have a plan on how to handle the problem and went to see your immediate superior to discuss about it. Instead of accepting your idea, your immediate superior offers another strategy and wants you to follow it.” Since the supervisor may convince the subordinate to follow his or her instructions by using a particular base of power, one of the seven bases of power was listed at this stage.

Participants were then asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each dependent measure item. After responding to the dependent measures, they also responded to demographic and cultural orientation scale items.¹

Measures

Except for demographic items, all other measures required the participants to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). The items in each scale were summed and then averaged to arrive at an overall score for the scale. Higher scores represented higher levels of each of the constructs.

Dependent measures. Attitude change was conceptualized based on the classic work by Kelman (1958, 2006) in terms of compliance (2 items, $\alpha = .91$) and commitment (4 items, $\alpha = .88$). Sample items include, “I would agree with him/her because he/she is my immediate

supervisor” (compliance) and “I would accept my immediate superior’s strategy primarily because it is similar to my values” (commitment). These items were taken from the work of O’Reilly and Chatman (1986). As expected, the two dependent measure scores were weakly, but positively correlated ($r = .19, p < .01$).

Cultural orientation. We used 12 items (Dorfman & Howell, 1988; Howell et al., 2000) to assess the employee cultural orientations: power distance (6 items) and collectivism (6 items). Dorfman and Howell developed this scale as an on-going effort to extend Hofstede’s (1980, 1993) work to the individual level of analysis, so that it can be used at both the micro (individual) and macro (national) levels of analysis. Evidence regarding reliability, validity, and usefulness of the scale was found for research studies conducted in Taiwan and Mexico (Dorfman & Howell, 1988). Sample items include, “Managers should seldom ask for the opinions of employees” (Power Distance) and “Being accepted by the members of your workgroup is very important” (Collectivism). The coefficients alpha for power distance and collectivism in this study were estimated to be .89 and .80, respectively. The two cultural dimensions—power distance and collectivism--were significantly, but moderately, correlated ($r = .31, p < .01$).

Demographic variables. Participants provided information about their age, gender, ethnicity, managerial level, and work experience.

Results

Psychometric Properties of the Measures

Prior to testing the major boundary condition hypothesis, we performed a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to examine the psychometric properties (i.e., dimensionality and distinctiveness) of the measures employed in the study and to gather empirical evidence

against common method variance. We conducted CFA using covariance matrix and maximum likelihood estimation to assess the discriminant validity of the substantive constructs measured in this study. We used four indices to assess the fit of the measurement models: Chi-squared statistic divided by degrees of freedom (χ^2/df), the goodness of fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The CFA results are summarized in Table 1. The first series of CFA proposed a two-factor structure (compliance and commitment) of attitude change measure, which demonstrated better fit indices than a one-factor model. The second series of CFA also proposed a two-factor structure (power distance and collectivism) of cultural orientation measure, which clearly demonstrated better fit indices than a one-factor model. Finally, to test for the discriminant validity of the constructs, we compared the four-factor model (compliance, commitment, power distance, and collectivism) with a two-factor model that combined the two cultural orientation factors and the two attitude change factors and with a one-factor model that combined all four factors. Nested model comparisons demonstrated that the four-factor model was much superior to the alternative models. Stated differently, results showed a significantly worse fit for the two-factor and one-factor models. Taken together, the fit indices of the nested models showed that attitude change measures (compliance and commitment) and cultural orientation measures (power distance and collectivism) were all distinct constructs. This fact may also be considered evidence against common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and Cronbach's coefficients alpha for study variables are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, the constructs exceeded the recommended level of adequate reliability (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010) and that they were as correlated as one would expect on theoretical grounds. In conclusion, CFA results and reliability

analysis indicate that the measures have sound psychometric properties in terms of reliability and construct validity and that there is no serious threat of common method bias in this research.

Though a formal manipulation check was not employed in the analysis, as an evidence in support of the manipulation, we next describe tests of the hypotheses stated earlier. Differences in different bases of power or their interaction with cultural orientation would not be found if the manipulation had been ineffective.

Test of Hypotheses²

We tested our interaction hypothesis by implementing a three-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) including bases of power (6 conditions), power distance (2 groups: high; low), and collectivism (2 groups: high; low) orientations as the independent variables and attitude change (compliance and commitment) as the dependent variables. Descriptive statistics (*Ms* and *SDs*) for each attitude change variable are displayed in Table 3 and two-way interactions are shown on Figures 1 and 2. We provide a description of significant results below.

Compliance. The ANOVA results indicated a main effect of power distance orientation ($F(1,167) = 12.85, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .07$), a main effect of collectivism orientation ($F(1,167) = 8.62, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$), and a power base by power distance orientation interaction effect ($F(6,167) = 6.21, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .12$). All other main effects and a three-way interaction did not reach their significance level ($p > .05$). Taken together, the analysis substantially supported our hypothesis that employees with low power distance orientation reported significantly ($p < .01$) more compliance with connection power and legitimate power. On the other hand, those with high power distance orientation reported more compliance with information power and referent power.

Commitment. The ANOVA results indicated a power base by collectivism orientation

interaction effect ($F(6,167) = 2.07, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .07$). All other main effects and a three-way interaction were non-significant ($p > .05$). The analysis indicated that employees with high collectivism orientation reported significantly ($p < .01$) more commitment with information, expert, and legitimate power; in contrast, those with low collectivism orientation showed more commitment with reward power. Thus, our moderation hypothesis received substantial support from the data.

Discussion

Summary of Key Findings

This study advances our understanding of social power effectiveness in the context of employee cultural orientation. The analysis indicated clear differences in the outcomes of various social power in that power effectiveness differed significantly across different cultural orientations. Consistent with our expectations and the extant literature, we observed a significant power base by cultural orientation interaction effects on power outcomes.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This study contributes to the existing leadership, social power, attitude change, and cross-cultural organizational behavior and leadership literature in three important ways. First, we are aware of no published research that has integrated these bodies of literature. In this research, we integrated them by means of experimental manipulations of social power. Second, we are aware of no systematic research that has examined the role of cultural orientation in the social influence process. We investigated the effectiveness of our model in the Malaysian cultural contexts.

Our study also shows that individual cultural orientation has an important bearing on social power effectiveness, and highlights the importance of leaders' awareness of employee

cultural orientations. Our results suggest that managers should use social power that are best suited to the employee cultural orientation.

Limitations and Future Perspectives

As with all studies, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, all study measures were self-reported. Given the study's experimental nature, this was necessary, as individual's reactions to influence attempts (i.e., compliance and commitment) are private and cannot readily be observed. Second, our cross-sectional design could give rise to concerns about common method variance. However, we assured participants of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses to help reduce the likelihood of response biases (Podsakoff et al. 2012). In addition, our CFA results documented discriminant validity of the measures. Third, the use of an experimental methodology might raise concerns over the generalizeability of the results. However, given that experimental designs permit the assessment of causality with precision, and are used extensively in the social influence literature (Kelman, 2006; Wayne and Ferris, 1990), this trade-off was worthwhile (Cook & Campbell, 1979). It should also be noted that our study employed full-time employees rather than business or psychology undergraduates. Nonetheless, future work should include longitudinal field studies with both supervisors and subordinates, and should include several countries to investigate cross-cultural issues in social influence area.

Conclusion

Our research demonstrates that the effective use of social power is contingent on employee cultural orientation. Leaders should be aware that the effectiveness of social power depends on the cultural orientation, and may wish to adjust their use of social power accordingly.

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Footnotes

¹A complete set of experimental materials is available on request from the first author.

²To strengthen the internal validity of the present findings, it was essential to examine if those demographics which were not controlled in the vignette have any impact on the dependent measures. We computed zero-order correlations between demographic (age, tenure, level, and gender) and attitude change variables (compliance and commitment). None of the correlations reached its significance level ($p > .05$) for any demographic variables.

Table 1

Summary of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA): Discriminant Validity and Evidence of Common Method Bias

<i>CFA Model</i>	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>GFI</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>
<i>Cultural orientation</i>					
<i>Two-factor base model</i>	129.12**	53	.91	.92	.08
One-factor model	390.58**	54	.69	.65	.18
<i>Attitude change</i>					
<i>Two-factor base model</i>	10.35**	8	.98	.99	.03
One-factor model	235.59**	9	.80	.66	.36
<i>Overall</i>					
<i>Four-factor base model</i>	303.85**	129	.90	.90	.08
Two-factor model	788.38**	134	.67	.63	.16
One-factor model	1030.87**	135	.58	.50	.19

** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics, Coefficients Alpha, and Zero-order Correlations of Study Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
1. Compliance	4.09	1.55	.91			
2. Commitment	3.71	1.29	.19**	.88		
3. Power distance	4.89	1.45	.14	.52**	.89	
4. Collectivism	2.89	1.00	.25**	.30**	.31**	.80

Note. $N = 194$; Diagonal entries in **boldface** indicate coefficients alpha.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Mean (SD) Scores on Compliance and Commitment as a Function of Power Bases x Cultural Orientation Interaction

<i>Attitude Change</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Bases of Power</i>						
		Expert	Referent	Legitimate	Coercive	Reward	Information	Connection
Compliance	PD-Low	4.38 (1.16)	4.67 (1.20)	6.14 (0.87)	4.39 (1.16)	4.33 (1.30)	3.06 (1.50)	4.59 (1.54)
	PD-High	4.66 (1.48)	4.18 (0.98)	3.00 (1.36)	4.71 (2.13)	3.90 (1.91)	4.00 (*)	3.35 (1.56)
Commitment	PD-Low	3.69 (0.94)	3.94 (0.74)	3.52 (1.80)	3.66 (0.68)	3.54 (0.99)	2.60 (1.19)	3.35 (1.22)
	PD-High	4.46 (1.11)	4.03 (1.29)	4.42 (1.13)	3.88 (1.56)	4.13 (1.53)	3.25 (*)	4.16 (1.26)
Compliance	CL-Low	4.00 (1.17)	4.23 (0.85)	5.00 (2.16)	4.10 (1.74)	3.44 (1.33)	2.58 (1.24)	4.11 (1.02)
	CL-High	4.88 (1.28)	4.38 (1.17)	4.20 (1.95)	4.81 (1.66)	4.62 (1.61)	4.35 (1.33)	3.20 (1.64)
Commitment	CL-Low	3.56 (1.19)	4.14 (1.37)	3.63 (0.75)	3.80 (1.09)	4.28 (1.59)	2.06 (0.67)	3.43 (1.39)
	CL-High	4.36 (0.85)	3.94 (1.03)	4.11 (1.59)	3.75 (1.27)	3.48 (0.92)	4.03 (0.99)	3.95 (1.16)

Note. Figures in parentheses are standard deviations; *Empty cell; PD = Power distance orientation; CL = Collectivism orientation.

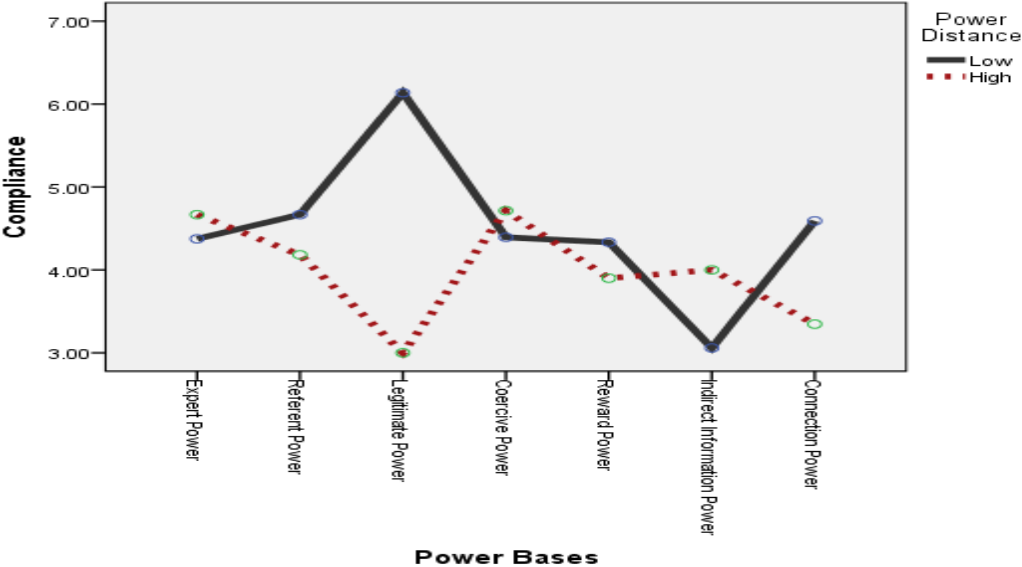


Figure 1. Bases of power x power distance orientation interaction effect on compliance.

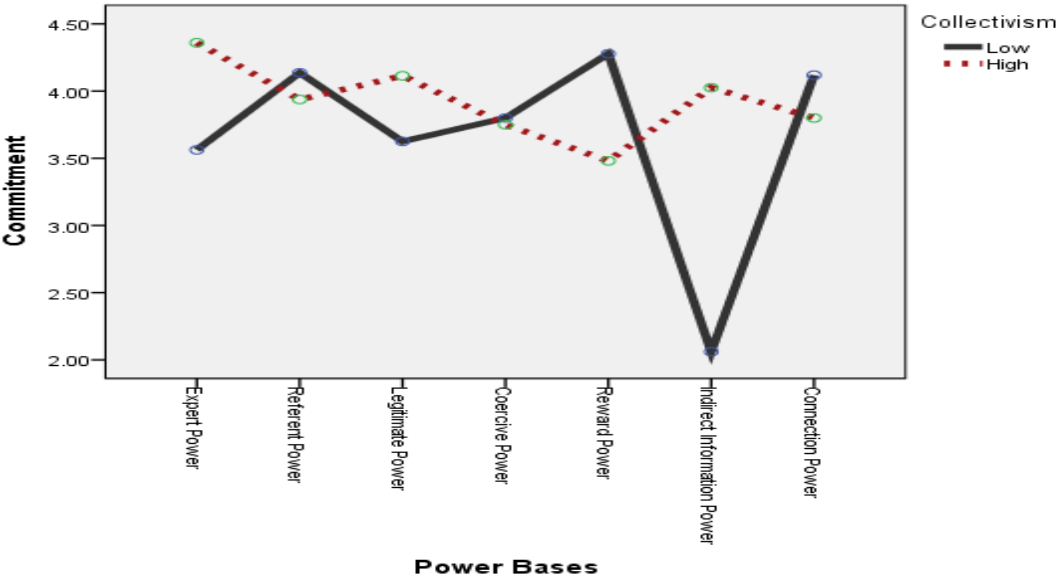


Figure 2. Bases of power x collectivism orientation interaction effect on commitment.