

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MIDDLE POWER: VERTICAL CODE-SWITCHING, ROLE CONFLICT, AND BEHAVIORAL INHIBITION

ERIC M. ANICICH  
University of Southern California

JACOB B. HIRSH  
University of Toronto

Decades of research have demonstrated that having or lacking power can influence how people think and behave in organizations. By contrasting the experiences associated with high- and low-power states, however, this research has neglected the psychological and behavioral correlates of middle power, which is the subjective sense that one's power is neither consistently higher nor lower than the power of one's interaction partners. In this article we propose that middle-power positions and mindsets lead to frequent vertical code-switching—the act of alternating between behavioral patterns that are directed toward higher-power and lower-power interaction partners. We draw from identity and role transition theories to develop propositions specifying when frequent vertical code-switching will, in turn, result in heightened role conflict. We further situate our theoretical analysis by updating and extending the approach/inhibition theory of power on the basis of insights from revised reinforcement sensitivity theory to introduce an integrative framework called the approach/inhibition/avoidance theory of power. Overall, we highlight the promise of conceptualizing power in terms of the stability of one's vertical orientation, offering novel predictions about the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects of power.

One of the first things an employee is likely to perceive upon joining a new organization is a complex system of power relations. Power is a pervasive feature of organizational life that is expressed in many ways; the actions that people take (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007), the clothes they wear (Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2014; Slepian, Ferber, Gold, & Rutchick, 2015), the postures they adopt (Cesario & McDonald, 2013; Park, Streamer, Huang, & Galinsky, 2013), the language they use (Magee, Milliken, & Lurie, 2010; Wakslak, Smith, & Han, 2014), the feelings they have (Waytz, Chou, Magee, & Galinsky, 2015), the biases in their thinking (Goodwin, Operario, & Fiske, 1998; Schmid & Amodio, in press), and even their physiological reactions (Mehta & Josephs, 2010; Schultheiss et al., 2005) all express the amount of power they hold within a group. Given the far-reaching effects of power, it is not surprising that

organizational scholars have highlighted its central importance with provocative statements, such as "Power is to the organization as oxygen is to breathing" (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006: 3) and "Every social relationship is a power equation" (Hawley, 1963: 422).

Abstract discussions of power are likely to conjure up stereotyped images of all-powerful CEOs governing a class of powerless underlings. Such caricatures fail to do justice, however, to the complex, interpersonal, and contingent nature of power relations common in organizations. In this article we present a novel theoretical framework that takes a relational approach to understanding the psychological effects of power. We begin by recognizing that organizational actors have a diverse network of interaction partners, each of whom has a distinct level of relative power. The vast majority of actors interact to varying degrees with both higher- and lower-power others, thus highlighting the need for a theory that moves beyond a static, unidirectional conceptualization of power and toward a continuous, contextualized conceptualization of power. Indeed, one important consequence of treating power as continuous

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as opposed to dichotomous is that a continuous conceptualization lends itself to examining a previously unconsidered range of the power distribution—the middle.

We propose that individuals who frequently alternate between interacting with higher- and lower-power others have unique psychological experiences that cannot be understood within existing conceptualizations of power, most of which focus on the experience of having or lacking power in an isolated situation. Specifically, we propose that individuals who repeatedly vacillate between upward and downward social interactions (i.e., those who frequently engage in *vertical code-switching*) are more likely to experience role conflicts than those with more stable vertical orientations. Individuals in these *middle-power* states have been overlooked in past theorizing and empirical investigations into the psychology of power, highlighting the need for an integrative theoretical framework that spans the full spectrum of power relations.

To begin to fill this gap in the literature, we develop novel propositions related to the psychological experience of power by drawing on insights from role-based identity (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Stryker, 1980) and role transition (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000) theories. Furthermore, we explain how our conceptualization of power extends the influential approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), which is based on reinforcement sensitivity theory (RST; Gray, 1982), by leveraging insights from *revised* reinforcement sensitivity theory (R-RST; Gray & McNaughton, 2000; McNaughton & Corr, 2004). We then apply this updated model, which we refer to as the approach/inhibition/avoidance (AIA) theory of power, to a diverse set of outcomes considered in past work. Figure 1 provides an overview of our theoretical framework.

Our proposed framework is both practically relevant and theoretically motivated. From a practical standpoint, there is little doubt that organizational members vary in the extent to which they alternate between interacting with higher- and lower-power individuals. Understanding the psychology of those individuals who perceive themselves as being near the middle of the power continuum is thus critical for developing a deeper appreciation of how power relations affect people throughout the entire organizational hierarchy. Currently, however, the

bulk of the available research is unable to inform our understanding of middle-power states. Anicich (2016) recently reviewed 557 independent studies that either measured or manipulated a variable related to social stratification (e.g., power, organizational level, etc.) and found that information related to the middle of the distribution was reported in only 30 (5.4 percent) of the studies.<sup>1</sup> Adopting a continuous view of power relations will allow researchers to extend the existing literature, which has mostly focused on documenting the many ways in which people with more power think and behave differently than those with less power (for reviews see Anderson & Brion, 2014; Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2015; Sturm & Antonakis, 2015).

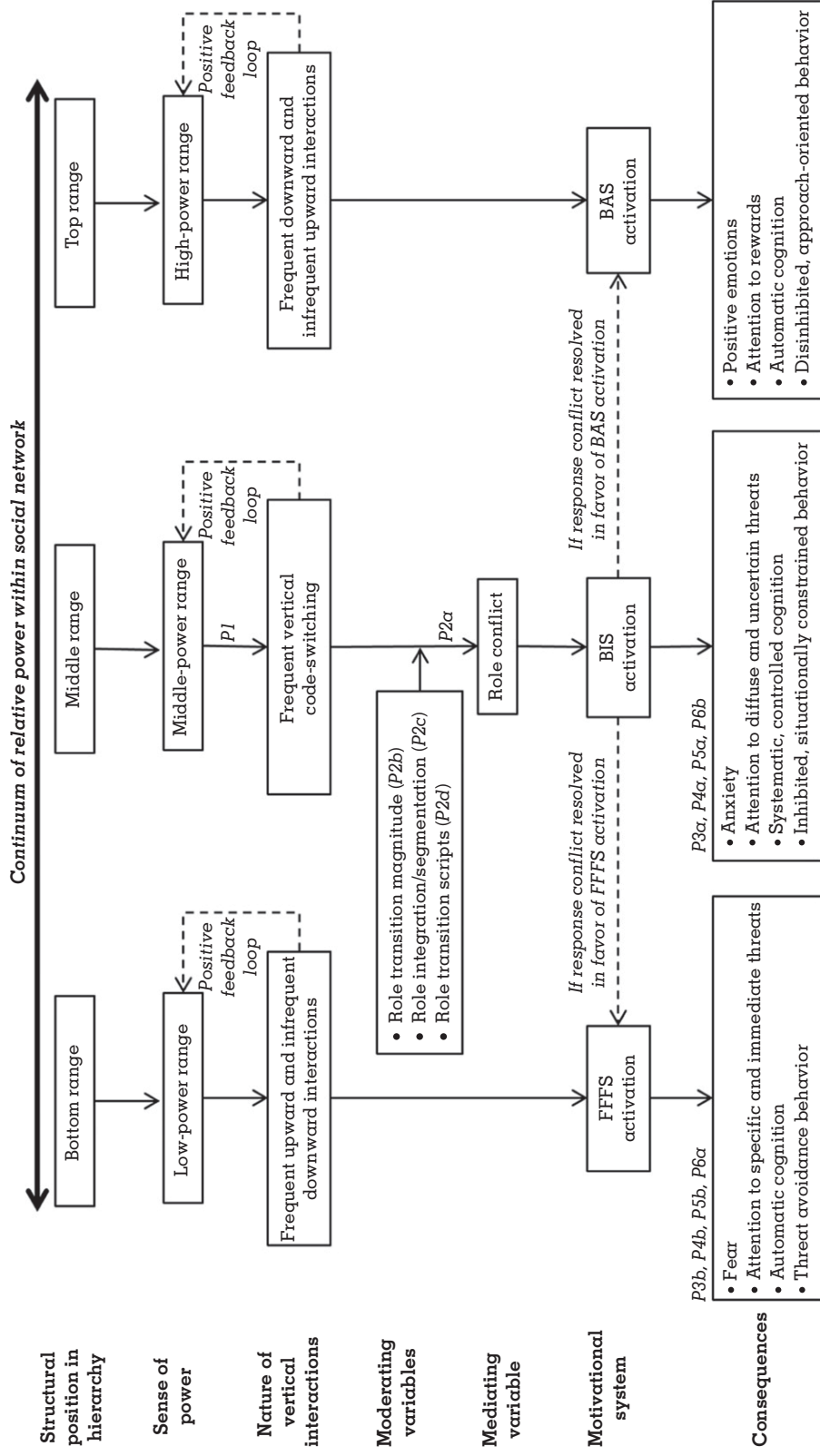
From a theoretical standpoint, our framework precisely answers Anderson and Brion's call for more research on the "multiple coexisting roles that individuals play in organizations," such as when "a given manager is high in power in that he has asymmetrical control over his subordinates but is also low in power in that the manager's boss has asymmetrical control over him" (2014: 85). We further respond to Sturm and Antonakis's call for researchers to address "the physiological underpinnings of power," including "more automatic experiences, such as emotions" (2015: 157). Indeed, a central contribution of our framework is the use of advances in neuropsychology to update and extend the approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003), which draws on an outdated understanding of the motivational systems that are proposed to mediate the effects of power on behavioral outcomes. Finally, our framework is a timely response to concerns raised by identity scholars that "we understand little about how people interpret and respond to different sorts of organizational/occupational pressures on their identities" (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013: 622), and that we need "much more research . . . on the combined dynamics of identity desire and imposition, as well as on their associated power implications" (Anteby, 2013: 1285).

Overall, our framework makes three important contributions to the social hierarchy literature. (1) We present a continuous and contextualized theory of power that lends itself to considering the

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, of the thirty studies that did include information about the middle, ten (33.3 percent) documented a clear curvilinear relationship between the social stratification variable and the outcome of interest.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Overview of the AIA Theory of Power**



previously overlooked concepts of middle power and vertical code-switching. (2) We leverage this conceptualization of power to update and extend an influential theory of power on the basis of advances in the neuropsychological literature, introducing the AIA theory of power. And (3) we offer guidance to future researchers interested in testing elements of our framework by recommending novel strategies for measuring and manipulating power.

### MIDDLE POWER AND VERTICAL CODE-SWITCHING

The study of power has a long and rich history in the social and organizational sciences (Blau, 1964; Clegg, 1989; Clegg et al., 2006; Foucault, 1982; French & Raven, 1959; Lukes, 2004; Pfeffer, 1981; Weber, 1946). Here we define power as having asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations (Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Building on previous work, we propose that an individual's objective power level derives from his or her structural position in the organizational hierarchy but that the psychological effects of this position are mediated through the subjective sense of power, which we define as "an individual's internal mental representations of their power in relation to others in their social environments" (Tost, 2015: 30). This sense of power reflects the extent to which an individual believes he or she possesses the "ability to control the outcomes, experiences, or behaviors of others" (Tost, 2015: 30; see also Anderson & Galinsky, 2006, and Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012).

Importantly, the subjective sense of power is the proximal variable of theoretical interest, given our framework's emphasis on intrapsychic processes and motivations. Thus, one's structural position in the organizational hierarchy is only relevant insofar as it affects one's subjective sense of power.<sup>2</sup> Our approach is also distinct

from conceptualizations of power that emphasize larger units of analysis (e.g., departmental power; Crozier, 1964; Perrow, 1970; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974). In this way we build on recent work that treats power as an interpersonal, state-based experience (Anderson et al., 2012; Smith & Magee, 2015) and on past work that emphasizes the context-specific nature of power (Pfeffer, 1981), such as Clegg's (1989: 208) description of an episodic power circuit involving intermittent "power over another."

According to our framework, individuals with a relatively high sense of power are likely to perceive the majority of their current and future interaction partners as having less power than they do (i.e., they mainly have a downward vertical orientation in relation to others). Individuals with a relatively low sense of power are likely to perceive the majority of their current and future interaction partners as having more power than they do (i.e., they mainly have an upward vertical orientation in relation to others). However, existing conceptualizations of power do not adequately account for the experiences of individuals who perceive their power to be neither consistently higher nor lower than the power of their interaction partners.

Individuals in these middle-power states, we propose, have a bidirectional (i.e., unstable) vertical orientation, reflecting the subjective perception that their power is neither consistently higher nor lower than the power of others in their social network. According to our framework, one's sense of power can be arrayed along a continuum and determines the ratio of upward to downward interactions that one is likely to experience, given the composition of one's social network. The ratio of one's upward to downward interactions, in turn, influences one's sense of power, creating a positive feedback loop such that one experiences a stronger sense of low power as the ratio of one's upward to downward interactions approaches  $\infty$ , a stronger sense of middle power as the ratio of one's upward to downward interactions approaches 1, and a stronger sense of high power as the ratio of one's upward to downward interactions approaches 0, all else being equal.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Situations undoubtedly exist, for example, in which one structurally occupies a position in the middle of the hierarchy but has the subjective experience of high power, as is likely the case when a frontline manager spends the majority of her time interacting with subordinates and comparatively little time interacting with her boss(es). However, for the sake of parsimony, we treat one's structural (i.e., objective) power as being highly positively correlated with one's subjective sense of power. For a more thorough treatment of the relationship between structural power and the subjective sense of power, see Tost (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Research on dominance complementarity supports the idea that upward or downward interactions can trigger a relatively low or high sense of power, respectively (Goldstein & Hays, 2011; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003).

Additionally, structural roles and subjective experiences that activate a bidirectional vertical orientation are likely to produce the psychological experience of middle power to a greater extent than structural roles and subjective experiences that activate a predominantly unidirectional vertical orientation, which is consistent with Galinsky et al.'s (2015) review of the structural and experiential antecedents of the sense of power. Whereas past theorizing on power has tended to implicitly focus on individuals with ratios of upward to downward interactions that approach either 0 or  $\infty$ , our framework is unique in explicitly considering the experiences of an additional set of individuals—those with a ratio closer to 1. Although it is convenient to refer to low-, middle-, and high-power states as discrete categories, these labels are best understood as referring to ranges along the broader continuum of relative power.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when we refer to the sense of middle power throughout the article, we are referring to individuals who have a ratio of upward to downward interactions that approaches the value of 1. This continuous conceptualization of relative power suggests that a person could experience a bidirectional vertical orientation from almost any position along the power continuum, depending on various situational factors. Nonetheless, the individuals who are closest to the middle of the sense of power distribution are the ones who are most likely to adopt a bidirectional vertical orientation.

One behavioral consequence of possessing a bidirectional vertical orientation is frequently engaging in vertical code-switching, which we define as the act of alternating between behavioral patterns directed toward higher-power and lower-power interaction partners. Code-switching has been discussed in linguistic (Heller, 1988) and cross-cultural (Molinsky, 2007) contexts, but it has not yet been considered in relation to organizational power dynamics. Linguistic code-switching occurs when bilingual individuals alternate between two languages in the same conversation (Heller, 1988) to create a desired social impression (Myers-Scotton, 1993), whereas cross-cultural code-switching involves “purposefully modifying one’s behavior in an interaction in a foreign setting in order to

accommodate different cultural norms for appropriate behavior” (Molinsky, 2007: 624). Importantly, the concepts of “middleness” and code-switching are crucially intertwined. Middleness refers to being an equal distance from the extremities of some continuum. All else being equal, as one approaches an extreme end of a variable’s continuum (e.g., relative power), the probability of encountering situations that require directional code-switching with respect to the underlying variable decreases. This fact is fundamental to our theoretical framework.

Consider a simple social network involving three employees who regularly interact with one another: Employees A, B, and C. During their interactions, Employee A experiences a high sense of power in relation to both Employees B and C. Employee B experiences a high sense of power in relation to Employee C but a low sense of power in relation to Employee A. Finally, Employee C experiences a low sense of power in relation to both Employees A and B. We propose that the bulk of the existing empirical and theoretical work does not adequately describe the experience of Employee B as someone who possesses a bidirectional vertical orientation and therefore must regularly engage in vertical code-switching, feeling and behaving relatively powerful in one moment and relatively powerless in the next. While those at the higher or lower ends of the power continuum experience the same vertical orientation during most of their interactions, employees whose relative power falls closer to the middle of the continuum must repeatedly alternate between higher- and lower-power interaction patterns.

This situation characterizes the experience of middle managers, who “act as the transmission belt between the top of the organization and the bottom” (Osterman, 2008: 66), and it can have a strong impact on the bottom line. For example, in a large-scale analysis of the computer game industry, Mollick (2012) found that the behavior of middle managers accounted for 22.3 percent of the variation in revenue after controlling for project-level predictors. In fact, the Boston Consulting Group surveyed thousands of employees and devoted an entire report to better learn how to empower this “neglected but critical group” (Caye et al., 2010). Their findings revealed that 64 percent of employees said that middle managers were more critical than top managers in driving team member engagement (Caye et al., 2010).

<sup>4</sup> For earlier work highlighting nuanced social distance perspectives in hierarchies, see Alexander (1972), De Soto and Bosley (1962), and Wegener (1992).

Crucially for our theory, employees who are the most likely to experience a sense of middle power (i.e., those who occupy mid-level positions in an organizational hierarchy) frequently encounter situations that require vertical code-switching (Balogun, 2003; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Giangreco & Peccei, 2005). As a result, middle managers often find themselves caught between various stakeholder groups (Keys & Bell, 1982) and "enmeshed in a web of relationships generating relentless and conflicting demands" (McKinney, McMahon, & Walsh, 2013: 4). Consistent with this observation, Gleeson and Shain (1999) concluded that two of the primary challenges facing middle managers are (1) being caught in the middle between higher- and lower-power individuals without sufficient support and (2) managing ambiguity related to how they and others perceive their role in the organization.<sup>5</sup> This leads to our first proposition.

*Proposition 1: Having a sense of middle power will result in increased vertical code-switching across interaction partners.*

Next we consider the psychological consequences of vertical code-switching, in addition to several moderators that affect the magnitude of these consequences.

### FROM VERTICAL CODE-SWITCHING TO ROLE CONFLICT

In this section we draw on role transition theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) to develop the next link in our theoretical framework—namely, that vertical code-switching is associated with increased role conflict.

Individuals can occupy numerous social roles. The unique behavioral expectations or norms attached to each of these roles become activated in response to situational cues derived from the social context and one's role in the interaction (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Schmitt, Dube, & Leclerc, 1992; Stryker, 1968; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). In

addition to specifying behavioral expectations, roles have implications for identity. Indeed, each role that an employee is expected to perform is associated with a distinct role identity—the "self-in-role" meaning ascribed to a particular role (Ashforth et al., 2000: 475). According to role transition theory, an employee's various role identities and their corresponding normative expectations are demarcated by role boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000). For example, an employee is likely to enact the norms associated with being a subordinate (e.g., deference, respect) when interacting with a superior, but is likely to enact the norms associated with being a leader (e.g., assertiveness, dominance) when interacting with a subordinate. This reasoning is consistent with the view that social roles, identity, and relative power are inherently intertwined in organizations (Joshi & Fast, 2013; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2004).

Role conflict occurs when "the various social roles one is expected to perform provide incompatible behavioral prescriptions" (Hirsh & Kang, 2016: 3; see also Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Diedrick, & Rosenthal, 1964, and Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Incompatible role prescriptions can emerge across or within distinct life domains. For example, heightened role conflict can result from incompatible work and family expectations (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), as well as from incompatible expectations associated with specific organizational roles (Rizzo et al., 1970).

We propose that managing the competing norms associated with different roles and role-based identities can lead to increased role conflict (e.g., see Hobfoll, 2002; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Molinsky, 2007; Tubre & Collins, 2000). With respect to our framework, Rizzo et al. acknowledged that while any role in the hierarchy can be associated with role conflicts, certain roles (e.g., frontline managers) are likely to face such conflicts more regularly because of being "caught in the middle (Roethlisberger, 1945) between conflicting demands from superiors and subordinates" (1970: 153). Consistent with this reasoning, Floyd and Lane (2000) proposed that middle managers are more likely to experience role conflict than employees at other levels because they are confronted with a complex set of expectations and required to adopt numerous and conflicting strategic roles.

Furthermore, extensive empirical research has demonstrated that employees who engage in boundary-spanning activity, such as switching

<sup>5</sup> Although the psychological experience of middle power is neither limited to nor necessarily possessed by middle managers, they are useful organizational actors to consider because they are the most likely to possess a bidirectional vertical orientation owing to their structural position, all else being equal.

from a high-power role (e.g., leader) to a low-power role (e.g., subordinate), or vice versa, are more likely to experience role conflict (Adams, 1976; Friedman & Podolny, 1992; Kahn et al., 1964; Miles & Perreault, 1976). Indeed, Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler noted that “the best documented organizational correlates of role conflict are boundary spanning requirements” (1981: 56). Because individuals with a clear sense of low or high power are more likely than individuals with a sense of middle power to retain the same hierarchical role across interaction partners, they will be less likely to face the challenge of balancing competing organizational roles and role-based identities.

Although the norms associated with different roles may seem clear and easily adoptable when considered independently, research on role spillover suggests that transitions from one role to another can be difficult to execute such that an initially activated role identity will often have some degree of lingering activation when the situation calls for a different role to be adopted (Crouter, 1984; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Staines, 1980), an outcome consistent with Ramarajan and Reid’s (2013) discussion of the “myth of separate worlds.” For example, Williams and Alliger (1994) collected daily reports from employed parents and observed unpleasant mood spillover from work to family, and vice versa. Similarly, when the norms associated with a subordinate (leader) role identity are still salient, owing to their lingering activation from one’s previous interaction, role conflict will be experienced when a leader (subordinate) role identity becomes activated subsequently. Consider an employee who must transition from dominantly directing the behavior of his/her subordinates to deferentially accepting directions from his/her superior. On the basis of role spillover, we predict that in this situation the employee would experience role conflict while attempting to suppress the norms associated with being a leader (e.g., acting dominantly) so as to not overstep his/her bounds in the current interaction. Role conflict may also emerge when interacting with subordinates but thinking about the perspective of one’s superior(s) (e.g., “What will my boss think if I tell my subordinates to do X?”). To the extent that one’s desire to pursue a course of action is in perceived conflict with the expectations of one’s superior, role conflict is likely to emerge.

In a team context where individuals with a sense of middle power need to simultaneously interact with higher- and lower-power others, the tension between any incompatible role expectations is likely to be particularly strong. Importantly, however, we do not view the simultaneous presence of higher- and lower-power individuals as a necessary condition to produce role conflict among individuals in middle-power states. As discussed above, a similar psychological experience is likely to emerge when frequently alternating between incompatible roles with very different normative expectations (Hirsh & Kang, 2016; Molinsky, 2007).<sup>6</sup> Formally, we offer the following proposition.

*Proposition 2a: An increased frequency of vertical code-switching will result in a heightened experience of role conflict.*

Although we propose that, in general, vertical code-switching will produce role conflict, this relationship likely depends on certain moderators. In the following sections we draw on role transition theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) to develop three moderating propositions.

### **Role Transition Magnitude**

Vertical code-switching is a type of micro role transition (Ashforth et al., 2000) that involves psychologically disengaging from one role and engaging in another role. *Role transition magnitude* reflects the level of contrast between the two role identities involved in the role transition (Ashforth et al., 2000; for related conceptualizations see also Bunderson, van der Vegt, Cantimur,

<sup>6</sup> An intriguing consideration that we view as outside the scope of the current framework relates to the role of ego depletion. On the one hand, ego depletion may be conceptualized as an outcome of role conflict because the suppression of the least relevant role identity (i.e., the one lingering from the previous interaction) is metabolically and cognitively draining (Courtright, Gardner, Smith, McCormick, & Colbert, 2016; see also Smit, Maloney, Maertz, & Montag-Smit, 2016). On the other hand, ego depletion may be conceptualized as a moderator of the relationship between vertical code-switching and role conflict because only the single most salient response is executed when one is depleted (Hofmann, Schmeichel, & Baddeley, 2012), without additional thought about how it may conflict with other roles or identities. In effect, depleted individuals would likely resort to their most familiar vertical orientation, even when doing so may be normatively inappropriate.

& Rink's [in press] description of "steepness" and Harrison & Klein's [2007] description of "disparity" with respect to group member characteristics). A high-magnitude role transition involves switching between roles with highly dissimilar role features, whereas a low-magnitude role transition involves switching between roles with relatively similar role features (Ashforth et al., 2000; Hirsh & Kang, 2016; Molinsky, 2007).

In the context of our framework, a high-magnitude role transition involves switching between hierarchical roles with a large contrast in behavioral norms (i.e., alternating between interacting with people who have much more and much less power than oneself), whereas a low-magnitude role transition involves moving between hierarchical roles with only a small contrast in behavioral norms (i.e., alternating between interacting with people who have only slightly more and slightly less power than oneself). As the magnitude of the role transition increases, the associated behavioral expectations become less compatible and the psychological cost of "switching cognitive gears" (Louis & Sutton, 1991: 55) increases, leading to greater role conflict. Thus, we offer the following moderating proposition.

*Proposition 2b: The relationship between vertical code-switching and role conflict will be weaker when role transition magnitude is low and stronger when role transition magnitude is high.*

### Role Integration versus Segmentation

Thus far, we have assumed that actors experience vertical code-switching as involving two distinct roles that are in conflict with one another. However, individuals differ in the extent to which they perceive role transitions as eliciting a sense of conflict between discrepant norms and identities (Nippert-Eng, 1996, 2008). These differences are related to the adoption of role *integration* or *segmentation* strategies, which reflect the extent to which a person perceives his or her various roles and identities as "compatible and integrated vs. oppositional and difficult to interpret" (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002: 9; see also Roccas & Brewer's [2002] distinction between social identity intersection and compartmentalization). Role integration and segmentation are commonly discussed in work-family (Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005), cross-cultural (Benet-Martínez &

Haritatos, 2005; Berry, 1997), and multiracial (Cheng & Lee, 2009) contexts and have implications for a wide range of outcomes. Role integration in particular has been associated with cognitive flexibility (Mok & Morris, 2009), heightened creativity (Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012), and various indicators of well-being (Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008).

Importantly, where one falls along the role integration-segmentation continuum is a function of the structural constraints imposed by one's role (i.e., the extent to which one's role structurally dictates one's pattern of interactions with superiors and subordinates) *and* one's desire for integration or segmentation (i.e., the extent to which one has a personal preference for integration or segmentation; e.g., see Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 2008; Rothbard et al., 2005). In the context of our framework, employees with highly integrated roles may regularly attend blended meetings with their superiors and subordinates, thus reinforcing the overlap between their leader and subordinate role-based identities, whereas employees with highly segmented roles may regularly attend separate meetings with their superiors and subordinates, thus reinforcing the separation between their leader and subordinate role-based identities.

According to role transition theory, adopting a role segmentation strategy makes crossing role boundaries more difficult. Thus, individuals who occupy a structural role that serves to reinforce distinct leader and subordinate identities will experience vertical code-switching as more burdensome than individuals who occupy a structural role that serves to blur the boundary between leader and subordinate identities. Similarly, individuals who have a personal preference for maintaining distinct leader and subordinate identities will experience vertical code-switching as more burdensome than individuals who have a personal preference for blurring the boundaries between these two role-based identities.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Rothbard et al. (2005) found that employees who preferred to segment their work and family roles, but whose organization encouraged integration of these roles (e.g., through onsite child care), had lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment than employees who preferred to integrate their work and family roles. We anticipate that there would be a similar mismatch cost for employees who preferred to segment their leader/subordinate identities but whose roles structurally mandated the integration of these different identities.



To further illustrate the distinction between role integration and segmentation strategies, consider two hypothetical employees: Susan and David. Both Susan and David have jobs that require them to frequently engage in vertical code-switching. Susan, on the one hand, adopts an integrative strategy because her role requires it structurally and she prefers this approach personally. Thus, she views her roles and role-based identities during upward and downward interactions as highly compatible with each other, seamlessly enacting divergent behaviors without hesitation, stress, or diminished performance. She experiences low role conflict. David, on the other hand, adopts a segmentation strategy because his role requires it structurally and he prefers this approach personally. Therefore, he views his upward and downward interactions as highly incompatible. As a result, David finds vertical code-switching to be difficult, exhausting, and unnatural. He experiences high role conflict. We formalize the outcome of this hypothetical situation in the following proposition.

*Proposition 2c: The relationship between vertical code-switching and role conflict will be weaker among employees who adopt a role integration strategy and stronger among employees who adopt a role segmentation strategy.*

### Role Transition Scripts

An important consideration that we have yet to address in our framework is the effect of time and experience. Role transition theory specifies that repeatedly engaging in micro role transitions leads to the development of *role transition scripts* (Ashforth et al., 2000). A script is "a schematic knowledge structure held in memory that specifies behavior or event sequences that are appropriate for specific situations" (Gioia & Poole, 1984: 449). In an organizational context, repetition of events and experiences serves to strengthen behavioral scripts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Poole, Gray, & Gioia, 1990). Accordingly, we propose that employees who regularly engage in vertical code-switching are likely to experience it as less difficult over time because of the development of scripts for transitioning between low-power (i.e., subordinate) and high-power (i.e., leader) roles.

To illustrate the impact of role transition scripts, consider two more hypothetical employees: Alice and Tom. Both Alice and Tom have jobs that require them to frequently engage in vertical code-switching. Alice has been in her role for many years and has maintained the same Monday schedule throughout her tenure: she attends a one-on-one strategy meeting with her boss at noon, followed by a team meeting with her subordinates at one. She knows precisely the tone to take and content to cover in each meeting, transitioning from one to the other easily and efficiently owing to her accumulated knowledge and experience, having engaged in this exact sequence of events countless times over the years. She experiences low role conflict. Tom is new to his role and still getting used to the timing and nature of interactions with his boss and subordinates. After attending an impromptu meeting with his boss, Tom is informed that his subordinates have assembled in a nearby conference room for a team meeting that he is expected to lead. He experiences high role conflict. Formally, we offer the following proposition.

*Proposition 2d: The relationship between vertical code-switching and role conflict will be weaker among employees who have highly developed role transition scripts and stronger among employees who have underdeveloped role transition scripts.*

We have thus far proposed that the bidirectional vertical orientation that characterizes the psychological experience of middle power is associated with frequent vertical code-switching, which, in turn, can lead to heightened role conflict. These are crucial insights that we believe hold the potential to inform the study of power in organizational settings. However, to maximize the coherence and utility of our contribution, it is useful to situate our propositions related to middle power in the context of a broader integrative theory. Thus, in the remainder of the article we advance our AIA theory of power by reconsidering the propositions put forth in the highly influential approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003). Most notably, we explain how our AIA theory of power extends the Keltner et al. (2003) model, which is based on the outdated reinforcement sensitivity theory (RST; Gray, 1982) by leveraging insights from revised reinforcement sensitivity theory (R-RST; Gray & McNaughton,

2000; McNaughton & Corr, 2004). We focus on R-RST because it can theoretically accommodate our conceptualization of middle power and vertical code-switching, given its emphasis on uncertainty and approach-avoid conflicts. In analogous terms, the approach/inhibition theory of power is built on RST, while the AIA theory of power is built on R-RST. We clarify this analogy below, arguing that the role conflict stemming from the psychological experience of middle power is associated with activation of the behavioral inhibition system.<sup>8</sup>

### ADVANCING THE AIA THEORY OF POWER

According to RST, which provides the neural and motivational foundation for the Keltner et al. (2003) model, two distinct neural systems regulate responses to positive and negative stimuli. The behavioral approach system (BAS), which is supported by the brain's dopamine system, is activated whenever cues to potential rewards are detected. Once activated, the BAS promotes the pursuit of these potential rewards, serving as the primary substrate of approach-motivated goal pursuit (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). A more responsive BAS, in turn, is associated with a greater sensitivity to positive stimuli and a reward-focused behavioral style (Depue & Collins, 1999). In contrast, the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), instantiated by the septo-hippocampal system, is the substrate of anxiety in the brain. Gray's initial version of RST proposed that the BIS is responsible for the slowing or cessation of goal-directed behavior in response to threat cues (Gray, 1982). Gray proposed that the BIS, when activated in response to potential threats, suppresses approach-oriented activity in the BAS, resulting in behavioral inhibition. He described individuals with a more responsive BIS, in turn, as being more sensitive to potential threats in the environment, taking steps to avoid being harmed.

In the years following the publication of the RST, knowledge related to neural system architecture evolved substantially, leading Gray and McNaughton (2000) to publish the R-RST. The key contribution of R-RST was introducing a new

motivational system, the fight-flight-freeze system (FFFS). While the original RST regarded the BIS as being responsive to threats, in R-RST this role is taken on by the FFFS. Whenever a potential threat is encountered, it is the FFFS that gives rise to fear and avoidance motivation, with the aim of escaping potential harm. In R-RST, in contrast, the BIS is activated when a situation elicits incompatible response tendencies (i.e., approach and avoid the situation), triggering anxiety until the response conflict is resolved.

Following Keltner et al. (2003), we agree that experiencing relatively high or low levels of power will be associated with a differential focus on potential rewards or threats, respectively. In relation to our framework, having a predominantly downward vertical orientation (i.e., having a relatively high sense of power) is associated with increased BAS activity, whereas having a predominantly upward vertical orientation (i.e., having a relatively low sense of power) is associated with increased FFFS activity. Importantly, having a bidirectional vertical orientation (i.e., having a relatively high sense of middle power) is associated with the presence of competing response options, leading to increased BIS activity in proportion to the amount of role conflict being experienced (Hirsh & Kang, 2016). In other words, having a sense of high or low power decreases the salience of competing response options, thereby preventing BIS activation.<sup>9</sup>

Crucially, the approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003) did not distinguish between the BIS and FFFS, since it built on RST rather than R-RST. We view this distinction as central to disentangling the effects of low and middle power; it is the reason we chose to position our framework in relation to the Keltner et al. (2003) model instead of other influential conceptualizations of power (e.g., Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Guinote, 2007; Magee & Smith, 2013). Thus, in the following sections we reconsider the Keltner et al. (2003) propositions related to BIS activation and make revised predictions based on our framework and the changes that were introduced in R-RST. Overall, we propose that individuals with a sense of middle power are prone to relatively high levels of BIS activation, whereas individuals with

<sup>8</sup> Although we acknowledge the ongoing debate about the value of neuroscientific theories in management research (Ashkanasy, Becker, & Waldman, 2014; Healey & Hodgkinson, 2014), we believe that such frameworks can usefully inform our understanding of the psychology of power.

<sup>9</sup> This insight extends Hirsh, Galinsky, and Zhong's (2011) general model of disinhibition related to power, which suggests that the experience of power is inversely related to the salience of competing response options.

a sense of low power are prone to relatively high levels of FFFS activation. We focus our attention on predictions related to low- and middle-power states because the BAS is proposed to operate identically in RST and R-RST. Table 1 summarizes the differences between our AIA theory of power and the Keltner et al. (2003) framework.

### Negative Emotion

Keltner et al. (2003) proposed that activation of the BIS is associated with both fear and anxiety responses. On the basis of R-RST, we follow Gray and McNaughton (2000) in proposing that fear and anxiety are separable emotions instantiated by different neural systems—the FFFS and BIS, respectively. From this insight we predict that employees in middle-power states will be prone to higher levels of anxiety. We base this prediction on the argument that frequent vertical code-switching triggers role conflict, which, in turn, is associated with BIS activation (Hirsh & Kang, 2016). In direct support of this idea, a recent epidemiological study of 21,859 full-time employees across a wide range of industries found that the types of employees most likely to experience middle power (i.e., mid-level supervisors and managers) reported higher rates of both short-term and chronic anxiety compared to low-level (i.e., workers) and high-level employees (i.e., owners; Prins, Bates, Keyes, & Muntaner, 2015). Similar results have been observed in non-human primate populations, with mid-ranking female Barbary macaques exhibiting a higher and more variable anxious stress response compared to high- and low-ranking females (Edwards, Walker, Bodenham, Ritchie, & Shultz, 2013). Furthermore, the role conflict that we propose results from frequent vertical code-switching is a known antecedent of work-related anxiety (House & Rizzo, 1972; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Van Sell et al., 1981). We can accordingly formalize our proposition about the emotional experience of employees who possess a sense of middle power.

*Proposition 3a: Heightened experiences of role conflict among employees with a sense of middle power will result in higher levels of BIS activation, as reflected in increased anxiety.*

As in the original Keltner et al. (2003) model, employees with a sense of low power can be understood as having reduced access to material

and social resources, while also being more vulnerable to the threats and punishments that exist in their social environment. Keltner et al. (2003) therefore argued that employees with a sense of low power require a greater sensitivity to threats in order to avoid potential harm. While we agree with this line of reasoning from the original approach/inhibition theory of power, R-RST clarifies that the sensitivity to threats is processed by the FFFS, rather than the BIS as originally thought. Accordingly, the heightened sensitivity to threats proposed to characterize the psychological experience of low power should be manifested most clearly in the emotional experience of fear, which reflects the desire to avoid harm, and not in anxiety, which reflects the experience of behavioral conflict and uncertainty.

*Proposition 3b: The greater sensitivity to threats required by employees with a sense of low power will result in higher levels of FFFS activation, as reflected in increased fear.*

It is important to note that we are not suggesting that employees with a sense of middle and low power are constantly in states of extreme anxiety and fear, respectively. We do propose, however, that these emotional experiences become more intense as the psychological salience of one's relative power increases. Interactions that make an employee feel completely powerless, for example, are precisely the type of experience that will trigger feelings of fear as mediated by the FFFS. Similarly, those situations that highlight the experience of middle power, such as interacting simultaneously or sequentially with subordinates and superiors, are the ones that will produce the greatest role conflict and, thus, be the most anxiety provoking.

### Attention to Threats

The type of negative emotion employees with a sense of low and middle power experience is inherently connected to the nature of the threats they face. Keltner et al. (2003) associated the experience of low power with greater attention to threats and activation of the BIS compared to the experience of high power. However, the distinction between anxiety and fear introduced in R-RST makes an important distinction between two different classes of threat (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). According to R-RST, the activation of the BIS supports the allocation of attention to diffuse and uncertain threats,

**TABLE 1**  
**Differences Between the Approach/Inhibition Theory of Power and the AIA Theory of Power**

Outcome Type	Approach/Inhibition Theory of Power (Keltner et al., 2003)	AIA Theory of Power
Emotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low power: Experience of fear and anxiety; BIS activation</li> <li>• Middle power: Not discussed</li> <li>• High power: Positive emotion; BAS activation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low power: Experience of fear; FFFS activation</li> <li>• Middle power: Experience of anxiety; BIS activation</li> <li>• High power: Positive emotion; BAS activation</li> </ul>
Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low power: Greater attention to threats in general; BIS activation</li> <li>• Middle power: Not discussed</li> <li>• High power: Attention to rewards; BAS activation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low power: Greater attention to specific and immediate threats; FFFS activation</li> <li>• Middle power: Greater attention to diffuse and uncertain threats; BIS activation</li> <li>• High power: Attention to rewards; BAS activation</li> </ul>
Cognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low power: Systematic, controlled cognition; BIS activation</li> <li>• Middle power: Not discussed</li> <li>• High power: Automatic cognition; BAS activation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low power: Automatic cognition; FFFS activation</li> <li>• Middle power: Systematic, controlled cognition; BIS activation</li> <li>• High power: Automatic cognition; BAS activation</li> </ul>
Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low power: Constrained by social norms; BIS activation</li> <li>• Middle power: Not discussed</li> <li>• High power: Disinhibited, approach-oriented behavior; BAS activation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low power: Deviance from threatening social norms when unobserved by higher-power others; FFFS activation</li> <li>• Middle power: Adoption of social norms to clarify identity; BIS activation</li> <li>• High power: Disinhibited, approach-oriented behavior; BAS activation</li> </ul>

whereas the activation of the FFFS supports the allocation of attention to specific and immediate threats. Critically, this suggests that individuals with a sense of middle power will be more likely to have a more broadly risk-averse mindset in which they frequently scan their environment for potential threats across a variety of contexts, whereas individuals with a sense of low power will be more attentive to specific threats of harm (i.e., the possibility of punishment from superiors). We can formalize these propositions as follows.

*Proposition 4a: Employees with a sense of middle power will attend more to diffuse and nonspecific threats than employees with a sense of low or high power.*

*Proposition 4b: Employees with a sense of low power will attend more to specific and immediate threats than employees with a sense of middle or high power.*

An example of a diffuse and highly uncertain threat was the global financial crisis of 2008 (Taylor, 2009; Wolf, 2010). If the heightened BIS activation associated with the perception of having middle power does indeed increase sensitivity to diffuse and uncertain threats, individuals in mid-level positions in particular should have had the hardest time coping with the broader crisis. Evidence consistent with this prediction was found in a large-scale analysis of more than one million employee responses from Boston Consulting Group's proprietary Engaging for Results database. In particular, middle managers experienced the largest drop in employee engagement following the 2008 financial crisis compared to pre-2008 engagement levels, when compared against relatively higher-power top managers and relatively lower-power team members (Caye et al., 2010). This effect is consistent with the notion that

the increased behavioral inhibition associated with the experience of middle power will also result in a greater sensitivity to environmental uncertainty.

### Systematic and Controlled Cognition

Keltner et al. proposed that, compared to individuals with a sense of high power, individuals with a sense of low power engage in more systematic and controlled cognition on the basis that "fear and anxiety are associated with vigilant, narrowed attention" (2003: 274). However, as described above, R-RST makes a clear distinction between the experiences of fear and anxiety and their associated cognitive processing styles (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). Building on this work, Corr (2010) developed a model of behavioral control associating the BIS with systematic and controlled cognition and the FFFS with automatic cognition, focusing on the active avoidance of aversive stimuli.

With respect to our framework, individuals with a sense of middle power must negotiate the uncertainty inherent in their competing roles in the organizational hierarchy. Effectively navigating this uncertainty requires the engagement of controlled and deliberative cognitive processing. Indeed, one of the major consequences of BIS activation is the allocation of attentional resources to help resolve the experience of behavioral conflict and uncertainty (Corr, 2010; Hirsh, Mar, & Peterson, 2012; Inzlicht, Bartholow, & Hirsh, 2015). While the original approach/inhibition theory of power suggested that low-power individuals would be prone to more controlled processing, as mediated through BIS activation, our revised model based on R-RST proposes that this better characterizes the psychological experience of middle power.

*Proposition 5a: Employees with a sense of middle power will engage in more systematic and controlled cognition focused on reducing uncertainty than employees with a sense of low or high power.*

Like the BAS, the FFFS is considered to be "well-suited to reacting to predictable stimuli from a pre-existing behavioural repertoire" (Corr, 2010: 385). Both the BAS and the FFFS thus support automatic and intuitive processing, with less emphasis on extensive deliberation and controlled

cognition. The BAS, however, supports the automatic engagement of behaviors that will help to approach potential rewards, whereas the FFFS supports the automatic engagement of behaviors that will help to avoid potential threats (Corr, 2010). Given that employees with a sense of low power will have a relatively consistent upward vertical orientation across interaction partners, the social context will support and reinforce the automatic engagement of deferent and submissive behaviors. We can thus modify Keltner et al.'s (2003) prediction about the experience of low power.

*Proposition 5b: Employees with a sense of low power will engage in more automatic behaviors focused on avoiding harm than employees with a sense of middle or high power.*

### Inhibited and Situationally Constrained Behavior

Keltner et al. (2003) argued that low-power individuals compared to high-power individuals are more constrained by situationally dependent social norms. We agree with this conclusion, but it is informative to consider how the experience of middle power may relate to social norm adherence. We have already discussed how vertical code-switching requires employees with a sense of middle power to alternate between enacting competing role-specific norms, but what about organization-level norms that employees across all power levels are expected to follow?

Group norms are "the informal rules that groups adopt to regulate and regularize group members' behavior" (Feldman, 1984: 47). Not only do norms specify the expected patterns of behavioral conduct for group members, but they also help to express the central values and identity of the group (Durkheim, 1983; Elster, 1989; Parsons, 1951). Importantly, norms are critical sensemaking tools for organizational members (Weick, 1995). Therefore, under conditions of uncertainty, employees can adhere to well-known and practiced behaviors to reclaim a measure of certainty over their environment. In this way norms can provide ontological security (Giddens, 1984) for organizational members who may be dealing with role conflict stemming from competing role

demands (e.g., employees with a sense of middle power).

The benefits of adhering to organizational norms are likely to be especially appealing to employees with a sense of middle power, because doing so will attenuate their experience of uncertainty. Being uncertain about one's role and role-based identity is an extremely uncomfortable experience (Baumeister, 1985; Durkheim, 1951; Erikson, 1968; Fromm, 1941; Lopes, 1987; Sorrentino & Roney, 1986), and humans are strongly motivated to reduce uncertainty (Hirsh et al., 2012; Hogg & Terry, 2000; van den Bos, 2001, 2009), especially when it is perceived to be self-relevant (Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). According to uncertainty reduction theory (Hogg, 2000, 2001) and uncertainty identity theory (Hogg, 2007, 2012), one of the most common ways to reduce personal uncertainty is by identifying with a larger social group (Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Experiences of uncertainty do indeed tend to result in stronger group identification (Grieve & Hogg, 1999; Mullin & Hogg, 1998; Reid & Hogg, 2005). Group identification helps to reduce uncertainty by allowing people to gain a sense of predictability and control over their environment (Hogg, 2007).

Although it is reasonable to assume that low-power employees will also strongly adhere to organizational norms because of the threat of punishment from higher-power others, this pattern of behavior should only emerge when low-power employees' behavior is easily observable to higher-power others who have the authority to punish them for deviating (cf. Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004). When low-power employees are not closely observed by higher-power others, there are reasons to predict that they may actually deviate from organizational norms to a greater extent than middle-power employees. For example, past research has found that injustices and other frustrations—experiences that we propose low-power employees are disproportionately likely to have—are common causes of workplace deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998). Individuals also respond to social humiliation with retaliation, even when the retaliator is punished for doing so (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Brown, 1968). Furthermore, when people believe that their organization or social system has disrespected them, they are

less likely to adopt the norms of that organization or social system (e.g., Belmi, Barragan, Neale, & Cohen, 2015; Colquitt, Scott, Judge, & Shaw, 2006; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Finally, meta-analytic results have demonstrated that low-level employees tend to be less identified with their organization than higher-level employees (Riketta, 2005). Identification with a social group is a key moderator of the extent to which people conform to any associated normative expectations (Christensen, Rothgerber, Wood, & Matz, 2004; Norman, Clark, & Walker, 2005; Terry & Hogg, 1996).

Employees with a sense of middle power, however, are likely to adhere to organizational norms, regardless of the social context, because they are more likely to identify with the broader normative structure of the organization as a way to reduce role- and identity-related uncertainty (for additional information on this topic, see Kelman's [2006] description of the social influence processes of compliance and identification). Based on these arguments, we propose the following.

*Proposition 6a: Employees with a sense of low power will demonstrate stronger adherence to organizational norms when observed by higher-power others than when unobserved by higher-power others.*

*Proposition 6b: When unobserved by higher-power others, employees with a sense of middle power will be more likely than those with a sense of low power to adhere to organizational norms because their heightened experience of role conflict will activate an uncertainty-reducing motive.*

Combined with the view that high power is associated with elevated BAS activity and decreased adherence to situational norms (Galinsky et al., 2015; Keltner et al., 2003), one implication of this proposition is that relatively high- and low-power states may both produce higher levels of deviant behavior compared to middle-power states, resulting in a U-shaped or J-shaped pattern of results (e.g., see Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001).

It is also worth pointing out that the activation of the BIS is a dynamic process that changes with

the relative salience of competing behavioral options. Specifically, the BIS becomes activated whenever a response conflict is detected, initiating risk assessment until the response conflict is resolved (Hirsh et al., 2012). Once the appropriate action is identified, however, the BIS will become disengaged in favor of the BAS or FFFS, guiding subsequent behavior toward the approach of rewards or avoidance of threats, respectively. The psychological consequences described above will accordingly be observed only when the BIS is activated by experiences of role conflict and uncertainty. If such role conflicts are resolved in favor of the sustained adoption of a particular vertical orientation (i.e., a clear sense of high or low power), the BIS will become disengaged in favor of the BAS or FFFS. As long as the role conflict persists, however, the BIS will remain activated.

## DISCUSSION

In this article we have developed a novel theoretical framework—the AIA theory of power, which embraces a continuous and contextualized view of power relations within organizations. In moving beyond a static, unidirectional approach to studying power, our framework offers insights into the previously overlooked concepts of middle power and vertical code-switching. To situate our framework in the literature, we have sought to update and extend the approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003) with the insights of R-RST, which, we have argued, can uniquely accommodate propositions related to the psychological experience of middle power as well as the experiences of those higher and lower on the relative power continuum.

Additionally, the distinction between the FFFS and BIS made in R-RST is a critical advance in our understanding of the neuropsychology of motivation, and we consider it to be an important extension of the approach/inhibition theory of power. While the predictions made by Keltner et al. (2003) about high power and the BAS remain unchanged in our model, the distinction between the FFFS and the BIS is an important theoretical advance because it allows for clearer predictions about the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects of relative power across the entire organizational spectrum. We hope that our model paves the way for future

research to move beyond a simple high- versus low-power distinction when studying organizational hierarchies and their psychological consequences.

## Recommendations for Researchers Interested in Testing Our Theory

As with most theoretical models, the potential value of our framework hinges on the ability of researchers to empirically test our propositions. Current conceptualizations of power are not equipped to test the propositions outlined in this article because they emphasize the simple distinction between high- and low-power states. We therefore propose that researchers draw on the relational approach to power by assessing the frequency and intensity of an individual's upward and downward social interactions, rather than attempting to categorize individuals as statically possessing high, middle, or low power—an approach that is neither realistic nor particularly informative.

From a survey perspective, researchers may consider asking respondents about the nature of their vertical orientation or the frequency of their upward and downward interactions within a particular workgroup or within their social network more broadly. Respondents who report engaging in frequent upward and infrequent downward interactions are likely to have a relatively stable sense of low power in relation to others in their social network. Respondents who report engaging in frequent downward and infrequent upward interactions are likely to have a relatively stable sense of high power in relation to others in their social network. Respondents who report engaging in frequent upward and downward interactions can be characterized as experiencing a sense of middle power. This methodology could lend itself particularly well to detailed social network analyses if employees were asked to rate the frequency of their interactions with specific others, along with the salience of their hierarchical role in those interactions.

From an archival perspective, researchers may be able to assess the frequency of vertical code-switching on the basis of network data. For example, an examination of email exchange patterns may reveal the extent to which employees communicate with others in relatively higher and lower positions in the hierarchy. In the

absence of network data, researchers should consider using structural indicators of power (e.g., job title, salary level, number of direct reports/supervisors) as proxies for the psychological experience of power. In general, structural indicators of power are likely to be highly correlated with one's psychological sense of power (although for examples of when this link may not hold, see Bugental & Lewis, 1999; Tost, 2015; Tost & Johnson, 2015).

From an experimental perspective, there is a strong need to develop valid and reliable manipulations of middle power, given the importance of experimental research to the study of social hierarchy and the fact that a systematic review of 557 studies from the social hierarchy literature over the past 10 years did not uncover a single experiment that manipulated middle power (Anicich, 2016). Manipulations that alter participants' vertical orientation or actual or anticipated frequency of vertical code-switching may be used to test elements of our model. Some scholars may wonder if specifying that one has an average or moderate amount of power will produce the same psychological effect as specifying that one's role affords a bidirectional vertical orientation and requires frequent vertical code-switching. This remains an open question and likely hinges on the extent to which one interprets possessing a moderate amount of power in a general sense as producing a bidirectional vertical orientation and requiring frequent vertical code-switching across interaction partners. Nonetheless, experimental manipulations of middle power are likely to be most effective when they simultaneously activate the conflicting normative expectations associated with relatively low- and relatively high-power roles.

A final point that deserves empirical attention is the extent to which vertical orientation or code-switching measures correlate with existing measures of power. Do individuals whose scores on the Sense of Power Questionnaire (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Anderson et al., 2012) fall in the middle of the response distribution also tend to be the individuals who possess a bidirectional vertical orientation and engage in frequent vertical code-switching? On the basis of the theoretical arguments put forth in this article, we would expect vertical orientation or code-switching measures to positively correlate with existing measures of power, but would also expect

the moderators discussed above to affect this relationship.

### Power versus Status

We chose to focus our framework on the antecedents and consequences of an individual's sense of power because one of our goals is to update and extend the approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003). However, some may wonder if our framework can be applied to other stratifying variables, such as status—the respect and admiration one has in the eyes of others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). In general, power and status tend to be positively correlated (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), and both are highly relevant to organizations (Aquino & Douglas, 2003; Clegg et al., 2006). They are nonetheless distinct constructs (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), as a number of empirical studies have recently demonstrated (Anicich, Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2016; Blader & Chen, 2012; Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012; Hays, 2013; Hays & Bendersky, 2015).

Despite the differences between power and status, there is reason to believe that our framework could be similarly applied to status. Status judgments figure prominently in impression formation and social comparison processes because status is a product of and therefore relevant to social relationships (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). Indeed, it is critically important for individuals to attend to the perceptions others have of them in order to successfully navigate all aspects of their social world (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). This is especially true in organizations where hiring decisions, job assignments, and promotion decisions are overwhelmingly determined by the perceptions of others. Therefore, individuals seek to actively monitor (Leary, 1996; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000) and manage (Baumeister, 1982; Leary, 1996; Leary et al., 1995) the impressions others have of them. According to these arguments, it is possible that middle-status employees, like middle-power employees, will experience role and role-based identity conflicts because their status in a given situation will fluctuate depending on the vertical direction of comparison.

Two studies in particular highlight the potential value of considering middle-status effects more generally. Phillips and Zuckerman (2001), working from a sociological perspective, studied the behavior of Silicon Valley law firms and security



analysts and found that middle-status actors in both industries (based on the proportion of attorneys who earned law degrees from prestigious universities and industry rankings of analysts, respectively) were more likely than their high- and low-status counterparts to conform to industry standards (Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001). More recently, Duguid and Goncalo (2015), working from a social psychological perspective, found that middle-status actors who were being evaluated were less creative than high- or low-status actors. In other words, middle-status actors were more likely than high- or low-status actors to conform to well-known thoughts and practices under conditions of evaluative uncertainty. Overall, we would expect status to operate similarly to power in our framework, especially in contexts where status and power are expected to be highly correlated.

### **Potential for Empirical Extension and Theoretical Integration**

From an empirical standpoint, future research should seek to develop and test additional moderating hypotheses. For example, factors such as organizational structure, tenure at a given power level, organizational commitment, psychological safety, and hierarchical stability may all affect an employee's sense of power and the accompanying psychological and behavioral consequences. Additionally, organizational and national cultural values related to hierarchy (e.g., see Anicich, Swaab, & Galinsky, 2015; Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004) may influence employees' perceptions of and reactions to power. Specifically, frequent vertical code-switching may have different implications in organizational cultures that endorse hierarchy compared to egalitarianism as a valuable and legitimate form of social organization.

From a theoretical standpoint, aspects of our framework (e.g., the implications of vertical code-switching and the insights of R-RST) may also be usefully integrated with or considered alongside other theoretical frameworks. For example, researchers have begun to integrate work on approach/avoidance and regulatory focus theories with work on core self-evaluations (CSE; Ferris et al., 2013; Ferris et al., 2011; Johnson, Rosen, & Levy, 2008), the "fundamental premises

that individuals hold about themselves and their functioning in the world" (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998: 161). Our framework's focus on vertical code-switching, role-based identity conflict, and the behavioral inhibition associated with middle power may fruitfully be related to CSE's core components of self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, emotional stability, and locus of control (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012). Researchers may also be interested in considering how our framework may complement or extend knowledge related to work-family (e.g., Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and cross-cultural (e.g., Molinsky, 2007) role transitioning. More work examining these and other areas of overlap is a promising future direction.

Additionally, while the notion that individual characteristics can have curvilinear consequences dates as far back as Aristotle (1999), scholars have more recently emphasized the value of theorizing and testing for these effects (e.g., Ames & Flynn; 2007; Grant, 2013; Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Le et al., 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). Importantly, a conceptualization of power that includes a consideration of the middle is required, at a minimum, to examine the possibility that power may have nonlinear relationships with various social and behavioral outcomes. Because Keltner et al.'s (2003) model only differentiates between high- and low-power states, it cannot provide any guidance about the existence of nonlinear effects. The current framework, however, provides the theoretical foundation from which researchers may begin to explore the consequences of the psychological experience of middle power.

### **Implications for Practice**

Our framework is relevant to organizational practitioners. Specifically, our arguments that employees' vertical orientation and frequency of vertical code-switching may be associated with negative downstream outcomes, such as role conflict and anxiety, suggest the need for organizational architects to consider the potential trade-offs associated with various organizational structure and network decisions. Positions that unnecessarily elicit a bidirectional vertical orientation or require frequent vertical code-switching should be eliminated or reimagined to the extent possible because role

and identity conflicts and the resulting experience of anxiety have been empirically linked to numerous negative health outcomes, including increased hypertension (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997), more frequent health center visits (Emmons & King, 1988), increased drug and alcohol use (Comeau, Stewart, & Loba, 2001), increased depression (Settles, 2004), and reduced life satisfaction (Karelai & Guillén, 2014). All else being equal, our framework implies that employees will be better equipped to avoid these negative health outcomes if they have a single boss and multiple subordinates than if they have multiple bosses and multiple subordinates with whom they regularly interact.

An additional implication of our framework relates to the dynamic nature of organizational power structures. A growing body of research acknowledges that hierarchies in general and employees' sense of power in particular are not necessarily stable (e.g., Aime, Humphrey, DeRue, & Paul, 2014; Bendersky & Shah, 2012; Jordan, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2011). Our framework holds potential for understanding employee reactions to hierarchical instability to the extent that such experiences elicit conflicting views of oneself as powerful in one moment and powerless in the next, in which case role conflict is likely to emerge and affect behavioral outcomes.

Finally, we have proposed that employees with a sense of middle power who view their vertical roles as integrated as opposed to segmented will experience less role conflict and anxiety (see Proposition 2c). Organizations may thus benefit from tailoring mid-level role descriptions and onboarding procedures to help develop an integrated and coherent identity. Explicitly tying middle-power duties to the broader organizational mission may help in this regard.

Ultimately, both employers and employees need to be mindful of and responsive to the potential challenges faced by employees who occupy roles that require frequent vertical code-switching. The negative consequences that are proposed to be associated with this code-switching can be minimized to the extent employees engage in relatively low-magnitude role transitions (Proposition 2b), adopt an integrated role management strategy (Proposition 2c), and develop strong role transition scripts over time (Proposition 2d).

## CONCLUSION

Interest in social hierarchy research has grown immensely in recent years, but theoretical advances related to the psychology of power have been sparse since the publication of Keltner et al.'s (2003) influential theory. In general, contrasting the experiences and behaviors of individuals who occupy opposite ends of a construct's continuum is an intuitive entry point into studying any social scientific phenomenon. However, such a strategy may mask a more nuanced and, importantly, more accurate understanding of a construct's relation to the outcomes of interest. By conceptualizing power as a continuous construct based on the ratio of upward to downward vertical interactions, we were able to introduce a novel theoretical perspective on power that holds the potential to advance knowledge related to the previously overlooked concepts of middle power and vertical code-switching. We hope that our integrative framework can serve as the basis for future explorations into this crucially important domain.

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**Eric M. Anicich** (anicich@marshall.usc.edu) is an assistant professor in the Management and Organization Department at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business. He obtained his Ph.D. from Columbia Business School. His research focuses on the forms and functions of social hierarchy within groups.

**Jacob B. Hirsh** (jacob.hirsh@utoronto.ca) is an assistant professor of organizational behavior and human resource management at the University of Toronto. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto's Department of Psychology. His research explores the cognitive and affective dynamics of personality, motivation, and decision making.



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