

REPLY TO WU AND WILKES:

# Power, whether situational or durable, decreases both relational and generalized trust

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In our article (1), we present evidence that individuals low in power are more trusting than those high in power. In a letter to the editor, Wu and Wilkes argue that our finding is “subject to two caveats about the kind of power and trust being considered” (2). Although refinements of our theory are welcome, we have reservations about the caveats brought forward.

## Situational vs. Durable Power

Wu and Wilkes’ (2) first objection is that the negative power–trust effect might flip once power is conceptualized as a durable (rather than situational) property. We expect that individuals endowed with durable power would still trust less (in relative terms) than those tormented by enduring powerlessness. Because of the reinforcing nature of power, enduringly powerful individuals—such as monarchs, religious leaders, politicians, and CEOs—tend to think and behave in ways that help preserve and expand their power (3). For the enduring powerless, hope dies even later than for those suffering only situational powerlessness. Why should a homeless individual, for example, not trust someone to provide shelter and food, if other options are close to nil? Thus, we contend that durable (like situational) power will lead individuals to trust less than those lacking such power.

## Relational vs. Generalized Trust

Wu and Wilkes’ (2) second point pertains to possible differences in the power–trust effect depending on whether one focuses on relational trust in known, close others versus generalized trust in unknown, distant others. We used a more continuous social-distance logic to elaborate on the equivalent idea that “the closer a high-power exchange partner is believed to

be (socially or even physically), the more likely it is that a low-power actor will place trust in that partner, a proposition that could be tested in future studies” (1). Although we explicitly acknowledge the qualifying role of social distance, we have no reason to expect that low-power actors would be less trusting than high-power actors even in generalized assessments of distant partners, at least not *ceteris paribus*.

## Preliminary Evidence

Wu and Wilkes’ letter (2) made us curious to empirically explore the relationship between durable power and generalized trust. We conducted a fairly simplistic correlational online survey among 533 individuals from the general population (subjects read a disclosure form approved by the University of Arizona’s review board). Participants indicated their agreement with two items (counter-balanced, using seven-point scales), one for durable power (“To get by in life, I depend on other people,” reverse-coded) and one for generalized trust (“Most people can be trusted”). Results revealed a significant negative correlation, Pearson’s  $r = -0.094$ ,  $P = 0.030$ ,  $d = -0.190$ , suggesting that the negative power–trust effect reported in our article (1) generalizes to more durable conceptualizations of both constructs.

## The Role of Contingencies in the Negative Effect of Power on Trust

As emphasized in our article (1), there are, no doubt, interesting contingencies relevant to the power–trust effect that are worthy of further study. It is clear that more work is needed to improve our understanding of the complex relationship between power and trust.

1 Schilke O, Reimann M, Cook KS (2015) Power decreases trust in social exchange. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 112(42):12950–12955.

2 Wu C, Wilkes R (2016) Durable power and generalized trust in everyday social exchange. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 113:E1417.

3 Magee JC, Galinsky AD (2008) Social hierarchy: The self-reinforcing nature of power and status. *Acad Management Ann* 2(1):351–398.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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