

Unveiling the Good and Evil of Organisational Power: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

This research seeks to investigate the "relational side's role" of Organisational Power in mitigating that of the "role power" in private firms under the lens of gender dynamics.

Employing a sample of service firm workers, a regression analysis is conducted to investigate the role of Reference and Experience, framed as Personal Power because of their relational nature, in mitigating the impact of Coercive power (Positional Power) and the gender-based dynamics occurring between them. From a theoretical standpoint, this study represents an encouraging update on organisational power studies, focusing on the way different forms of power impact and coexist with each other. Furthermore, the originality of this work lies in the will of framing power relationality - understood as personal power - to overcome the exercise of power as a form derived from the role supervisors. Lastly, to contribute to gender studies on the role and predisposition of women to have a perhaps natural predisposition for forms of coercion, as they are more sensitive to relationality and to establish bonds that produce, among their superiors, forms of positive power.

Keywords: power, organisational culture/climate, organisational power, organisational behaviour

1. Introduction

One of the most socially impactful dynamic occurring in organisations is that of acquiring and maintaining a power balance in the interaction between managers and subordinates (Levay, & Andersson Bäck, 2022). As a matter of fact, organisational life is pervaded by the exercise of power that unfolds across different organisational contexts and it could take on positive and negative connotations and impacts. The literature, by this perspective, divides into bright (Fousiani, & Wisse, 2022) and dark (Dirk, 2022) sides of power in organisations, investigating when and how the power that superiors exercise over their subordinates in work contexts have different directories. One is characterised by a relationship type, open to confrontation and based on motivation; the other one by a coercive type, based on the giving of orders and respect for hierarchies.

In general terms, power derives from both tangible and intangible drivers that create two sides of power that are inextricably connected, hence concomitant, so to forge organisational processes and management decisions (de Reuver, 2006). Power is a central concern of most managers and employees, and it has been put under the scholars' magnifying glass from a wide range of perspectives. By addressing Organisational Power at the micro level, interpersonal exchanges and characteristics of individuals are willing to shape the form of the relationship with work supervisors. This is especially true with gender and the nature of the relation that is established (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). The existing literature emphasises on disparities that lie in the exercise of power between male and female supervisors and subordinates. It also addresses resistance as awareness (Starhawk, 1987) of women committed in challenging gender-biased power relations by taking individual actions of resistance and sharing stories of women's discrimination and oppression, by increasing groups' awareness (Brown, 1994; Lerner, 1993).

In the second case, instead, the relationship between different forms of power (Foldy, 2003) and the effects they produces has, over time, gained great importance, especially in understanding how their natures can somehow influence, moderate, and reduce the effects of each type of power mutually. This is particularly true when forms of power leveraging on relationality mitigate those being role-based, hierarchical and coercive. In this sense, the

literature does not return a substantial body of studies that look at the influences that various forms of power may have on each other.

Accordingly, French and Raven (1959) have identified several forms of power. Amongst those, we find Coercive, Expert and Referent powers. Coercive power is understood as the ability of a superior to assign undesirable assignments or working conditions to a worker, or to remove or diminish things he or she is not willing to do. Reference and Expertise, instead, refer to the ability to provide information, knowledge or professional skills to guide one's colleagues to achieve a given goal.

While Coercive power refers to the authority that a superior has, by its organisational role, over the subordinates, Referent and Expert powers occur when there is a participatory exchange amongst the various members of the organisation. In sum, disadvantaged groups may be better able to leverage on their relational abilities in establishing dynamics based on mutual trust, motivation, experience, and reference. By leveraging on them, they can neutralise the danger of role power dynamics that lead to the dark side of Organisational Power.

Therefore, this research seeks to investigate on the "relational side's role" of Organisational Power in mitigating that of the "role power" in private firms through the lens of gender dynamics. Employing a sample of service firm workers, a regression analysis is conducted to investigate the role of Reference and Experience, framed as Personal Power because of their relational nature, in mitigating the impact of Coercive power (Positional Power) and the related gender-based dynamics.

The remainder of this paper is the following: after a brief introduction, the theoretical background provides a conceptualisation of Organisational Power and its different forms as well as gender-based dynamics on power issues. The hypothesis development chapter explains the research hypotheses that have inspired this study and it presents the model draft.

The methodological chapter shows both the method employed and the results achieved upon investigation, which is discussed in the next chapter, where great emphasis is placed on analysing the implications of this study. Lastly, conclusions address the limitations of the study and the future research agenda.

2. Background

2.1 Conceptualizing Organisational Power

This contribution seeks to investigate organisational power dynamics occurring at the micro-level, hence, on the more informal and intangible sources of power unfolding through interpersonal exchanges. Therefore, it is important to consider two of the main theoretical currents that have flowed onto the broad river of organisational power. These might have useful insights that enable, at one side, the understanding of how conditions for power exercise are set at the micro level in the private sector; and if gender differences can be replicated by manipulating an individual's level of power, at the other side.

The importance of these issues related to power, justice, reduction of inequality and people's well-being for successfully addressing the social, economic, political, and environmental challenges of the 21st century has been recognized in the 2030 Agenda on a global scale. Therefore, it is interesting to explore the issue of power dynamics in organisational contexts to the extent that, in recent years, it has become increasingly influential in both scholarship and policy (Schmidt et al., 2021). As argued, the definition of power has encountered much confusion (Hardy, 1995) and there have been several divergent and conflicting approaches to the study of power (Hardy & Clegg, 1996). However, despite the literature provides an extensive portfolio of studies on organisational power dynamics, a sustained and systematic analysis of organisational power exerted at the micro-level, insights into the sources of power explaining power relations within the public and the private sector and between males and females, is still lacking.

Considering the increasing importance of power and its related key questions, there is the need to place considerable emphasis on gender as a precondition to obtain a thorough understanding of how organisational power is accurately exercised (Branicki et al., 2023). Only by considering insights into the sources of power explaining the changing of power relations, it would be possible to make the acquisition and maintenance of power (McClelland and Burnham, 1976), a socially impactful process within organisations.

As Gioia and Sims (1983) argued, power stands at the core of employees' main apprehensions. Power is one of the most important cultural forces facing employees as they live within organisations and work to change them from the inside. Like all cultural forces, power is complex and often invisible. Fortunately, social psychologists and researchers have thought extensively about power dynamics in various contexts that has harnessed to shift the culture of organisations from the ground up.

2.2 Different Forms of Power

Many scholars have addressed this issue in the past by using different perspectives. Amongst those, it is important to cite Grimes (1978), McClelland (1975), and Pfeffer (1981). Nevertheless, the most influential textbook on power (Mintzberg, 1983) is the one published by French and Raven who provided social and organisational psychological research on the description of the power bases of managers. Although it dates back to 1959, the study on power research presented a framework based on five typologies of power that finds actual recognition: coercive, expert, reward, referent, coercive and legitimate power. Coercive, Reward and Legitimate power fall into the formal/positional power category while Referent and Expert power are included in the personal, thus, informal, and social category. According to this study, power is considered the agent's potential ability to influence a target inside a defined context (French & Raven, 1959). Hence, the usage of power occurs when the agent owns and controls a significant set of power sources to influence the other person to do what it is expected.

The authors provided a definition of each power base. Starting from reward power, they described it as *"the ability to administer to another thing he or she desires or to remove or decrease things he or she does not desire"* (French & Raven, 1959: 265). Coercive power was defined as *"the ability to administer to another thing he or she does not desire or to remove or decrease things he or she does"*, while legitimate power was represented as *"the ability to administer to another feeling of obligation or responsibility"* (Ibidem). This type of power is mainly used to create, during the symbol construction, legitimacy for decisions, values, and outcomes (Pettigrew, 1977). They proceeded with the definition of more informal and intangible sides of power, referent and expert power. The first was defined as the *"ability to administer to another feeling of personal acceptance or approval"* (French & Raven, 1959: 265), while the second as *"the ability to administer to another information, knowledge, or expertise"* (Ibidem).

To summarise, it could be argued that power stands as both the ability to choose a response to situations and the ability to influence the behaviour of others. In both cases, a disproportionate distribution of power and the exploitative or coercive use of power is where power becomes an oppressive force.

2.3 Gender and Power: A Matter of Resistance

Whatever form power takes, whether formal/positional or informal/social it may be, the concept of power means power over another person. Hence, the use of power consequently leads to resistance (Clegg, 1994). Resistance has been also considered a discipline of awareness (Starhawk, 1987) and has contributed to making the legitimacy of spiritual practice in organisations grow (Conger et al., 2008; Harrison, 1995). In history, there are proof of women committed to challenging gender-biased power relations by taking individual actions of resistance and sharing stories of women's discrimination and oppression, by increasing groups' consciousness and awareness. The creation of new forms of consciousness, such as the feminist one (Brown, 1994; Lerner, 1993), leads to new forms of resistance. Other cases where defiance and more openly disruptive acts are used to take the stance of marginalized interests and opinions. Others, instead, have chosen other ways such as whistleblowing or dropping out of the organisations. Alternatively, power may likewise conduce to compliance (Falbe & Yukl, 1992). In both ways, it can be argued that power involves the capacity to influence a commitment to organisational change within and around organisations (Pettigrew, 1973; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1992). Arguably, the exercise of and access to power changes depending on the context. As argued, social and organisational structures are sustained intrinsically by raced, classed, and gendered principles and values (Mills, 1992). However, the social construction of gender may become objectified to the point that it is seen as something that cannot be changed. Every organisation has taken steps to revise the process and structure of organisations to eliminate gender bias and to make changes oriented towards women's advancement and progress. Leveraging on the feminist perspective, for example, Townley (1994) put forward a series of settled problems and prejudices related to human resources practices and suggested an alternative perspective based on deconstruction that would have allowed human resources practices to be reframed, so to reject a hierarchical order. By the same vein, there are Martin's attempts (1990) to deconstructions and reconstructions of discourses that dismantle gender conflict, make the private and public stalemate reified and enable the elimination of discrimination. It can be argued that a great effort is still needed to deconstruct and disclose power's profound structures in order to understand their functioning to be able to maintain the status quo. It is important to point out that it is necessary to conduct individual acts of resistance to facilitate that radical change in organisations that collective action and political movements, otherwise, cannot create alone. Only when these profound dynamics are made visible it is possible to reveal strategies for change, which start exactly from changes in terms of values, principles, hence, cultural dynamics.

As far as the issue of inequalities is concerned, it would be important to emphasize on gender and power relations to understand what kind of relationship does exist between the two. For the purposes of this paper, a focus on this

relationship would be useful. The set of roles, behaviour and attitudes that societies define as appropriate for women and men (gender) can be the cause, consequence, and mechanism of power relations, from the intimate sphere of the household to the highest levels of political decision-making.

It is without saying that top managers, CEOs, managers, and interest groups usually exercise coercive and legitimate power and influence manoeuvres against their subalterns to get hold of and manage the power itself. In all cases, it can be assumed that organisational power dynamics are observable when looking at the groups involved and the agents visibly and openly showing influence attempts. Scholars struggle to detect power dynamics when the latter is invisible and unconscious: that is when individuals unknowingly accept the organisational status quo while abdicating the fulfilment of their goals (Lukes, 1979).

Gendered experiences of power have been such a pivotal point of scholarly inquiry that researchers have conducted studies exploring how gender intersects with other social identities (such as race and class) to shape unique and multifaceted experiences within power structures. According to the literature on this subject highlights the complex interplay between gender and other social categories, emphasizing the importance of an intersectional perspective for a more comprehensive understanding of power dynamics. Amongst these, it is interesting to consider the Intersectionality Theory, advanced by Crenshaw (1991) that emphasised on the interconnectedness of social categories like gender, race, and class. It recognized that individuals experience oppression or privilege not solely based on one identity but through the convergence of multiple identities. In the context of gender and power, this theory emphasizes the need to consider how various social identities intersect and mutually influence one another.

The literature has also revealed that the experiences of power are profoundly shaped by the intersection of gender and race. For women of colour, the intersection of their gender and racial identities introduces unique challenges that differ from those faced by white women or men of colour (Belkhir & Barnett, 2001). This intersectionality manifests in workplace dynamics, influencing access to opportunities, career advancement, and the negotiation of power relationships. Scholars have demonstrated how racialised gender stereotypes can compound challenges, contributing to distinct power dynamics for women of different racial backgrounds. The intersection of gender and class further complicates the experiences of power. Economic disparities intersect with gender roles, affecting individuals' access to resources, job opportunities, and decision-making authority. Working-class women may face specific barriers in ascending to leadership positions, contributing to a layered understanding of how socioeconomic status intersects with gender to influence power dynamics. Additionally, class-based expectations and stereotypes can shape perceptions of appropriate gender roles, influencing how power is negotiated and expressed.

The literature also explores the intersection of gender with sexual orientation, highlighting how LGBTQ+ individuals navigate power structures. The experiences of power for individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ are shaped not only by their gender identity but also by societal attitudes toward sexual orientation (Jackson, Lange, & Duran, 2021). This intersectionality is crucial in understanding the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace, as they may confront discrimination and bias that intersect with both gender and sexual identity.

Intersectionality extends to the experiences of individuals with disabilities, where the intersection of gender and disability introduces distinctive challenges. The literature examines how societal perceptions of femininity and masculinity intersect with ableism, influencing the power dynamics experienced by women and men with disabilities in various contexts (Kozleski, Proffitt, & Stepaniuk, 2023).

3. Hypotheses Development

Given the above premises unravelling the definitions of power and legacy, it can be argued that the relationship between the two can be viewed as conflictual when it comes to putting power of coercion in relation to personal power. The nature of Referent and Expert power is positive to the extent that they produce positive effects on organisations by building relationships. In the manifestation of coercive power, in fact, no exchange relationship is involved, as coercion functions through a dyadic relationship between dominant and submissive parties. Therefore it works through an individual's expectation to deprive (Blau, 1964; French and Raven, 1959; Goodstadt and Hjelle, 1973; Hegtvedt, 1988; Elangovan and Xie, 1999) or reward (Randolph and Kemery, 2011; Zigarmi et al., 2015). Emphasis on coercion has led to enhancing coercive traits of the dominant individual over the submissive one to neglect the other basis of power that can be found in the category of Personal Power, such as competence, altruism, love, and rewards. Against the conceptualisation of coercion, Expert and Referent types of power are fundamentally the result of expertise, logic, intelligence, knowledge, and, above all, relations.

This argument is verified by the fact that Expert and Referent power fall into the category of Personal power that, deriving itself from individual characteristics such as knowledge, values, and relationships with other people,

makes itself positively connected with legacy. This argument also leads to the point of how an organisational legacy is crafted as a collective process, built by participants in relationship with each other, leaders and members together, who all contribute to protecting organisational identity while promoting values and knowledge beyond the lifespan of organisations to which they belong to. Here, it is possible to argue that the relationship between personal powers is focused on the collective level of analysis and on how individuals (members and leaders) create and perpetuate an organisational identity that tends to reduce coercive behaviour in organisations.

Therefore, a panel of research hypotheses follows:

Hp1: There is a significant correlation between Expert and Coercive power, in which the first positively influences the latter.

Hp2: There is a significant correlation between Referent and Coercive power, in which the first positively influences the latter.

Studies have framed gender as the result of a hegemonic relationship (Duncan et al., 1997) suggesting that individuals exhibiting a greater extent of coercive power tended to keep traditional gender roles while rejecting non-traditional gender-role identities. This argument was supported by Walker et al. (1993) who considered that women in leadership roles are more likely to act without using sanctions and threats to influence others (Teven, 2006) while men, in the same roles, are keen in preserving traditional sex role stereotypes.

It has been argued that gender dyads made of male supervisors seem to show more coercive attitudes toward female subordinates than female supervisors showing coercion-based behaviour toward male subordinates (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004). As argued, female stereotypes within the workplace consist of distinctive female traits such as being friendly, cooperative, collaborative, motivating, and submissive (McClelland, 1975). Along these lines, O'Brien, Robinson, and Taylor (1986) continued the list of female characterising traits by referring to the sympathetic, reliant, and non-aggressive attitudes that women have toward others. These distinctive personal traits contribute to making women inclined to build interpersonal relationships and communication in the organisations where they operate (Kovach, 1987, 2020). However, considering the historical female stereotypes suggested in prior research mentioned above, it has been considered that female leaders and supervisors were not inclined to use coercive power to motivate employees (Randolph & Kemery, 2011). These studies have all contributed to demonstrating differences in how power is exercised and shown because of gender.

Nearly a decade of gender studies has focused on workplace relationships demonstrating the effects of positional type of power, hence, of coercive, legitimate, and reward nature in organisations and the motivational effects on employees (French and Raven, 1959; Hegtvedt, 1988; Randolph and Kemery, 2011). However, only a few studies have provided arguments demonstrating that coercive power has an impact on gender and women. It can happen that if the supervisor using power is the same gender as the employees, hence, gender (dis)similarity in such a binary relationship does not heighten or moderate employees' motivation due to the type of power that the supervisor shows in the relationship. If some scholars demonstrated an existing gender bias towards men in leadership roles (Eagly et al., 1995, 2007), others found a "nonsignificant gender difference in leadership effectiveness" (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014: 1140). Others, instead, found that gender roles have an influence on workplace expectations (Ergeneli et al., 2009). This is in line with the fact that men and women perform their jobs congruently with society's expectations".

Building upon existing studies and research, this study attempts to validate whether coercive power has an impact on gender and women while demonstrating that there is a natural predisposition by women to set up soft relation dynamics based on motivation, which should guard them against the coercive dynamics in the relationship with their superiors.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hp3: There is a significant correlation between the female Gender and Coercive Power, in which the first negatively influences the latter.

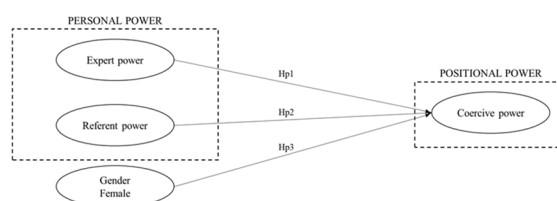


Figure 1. Research model

4. Methods and Results

4.1 Methods

Regression analysis is employed to check whether the independent variables in the proposed model are significantly predictive of Coercive (as Positional) power scores, settled as dependent variable (4-items Likert scale 1= strongly agrees / 5= strongly disagrees) according to the regression results. Referent and Expert (4 items each, Likert scale 1= strongly agrees / 5= strongly disagrees) power are the independent variables which lies in the domain of Personal Power. French and Raven's (1959) scales are, to date, among the most widely used in the literature for analysing power dynamics in organisations, and some attempts were also made to understand how various forms of power interacted with each other.

Gender constitutes the independent socio-demographic variable. Choosing to set the gender variable as an independent variable is due to the corroborated empirical evidence derived from the body of literature analysed over time.

To further test the model, two control variables were considered: type of contract, to assess working conditions (1=permanent 2=temporary); professional experience, expressed as employees individual professional age (Armstrong-Stassen & Cameron, 2005), 1= 1-11y 2= +11y.

Variables description is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics investigated

Nature of variable	Variable	Dimension	n.of items	Measure	Source
Dependent variable	Coercive power	Positional Power	4	Likert scale 1 strongly agree to 5 strongly disagree	French & Raven (1959)
	Referent power	Personal Power		Likert scale 1 strongly agree to 5 strongly agree	
Independent variables	Expert power	Personal Power	4	Likert scale 1 strongly agree to 5 strongly disagree	French & Raven (1959)
	Gender	Socio-demographic		1 = male 2= female	
Control variables	Contract	Socio-demographic		1= permanent 2= temporary	
	Professional experience	Socio-demographic		1= 1-10 years 2= 11 + years	

4.2 The sample

For the purposes of this study, power dynamics are investigated in a sample of n.229 service firms from Italy. The authors followed the non-probability convenience sampling technique to collect the data. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms and divided into four sections. The first section focused on the participant's demographic information like gender, contract and professional experience. The second section included questions about employees and their responses to coercive power. The third section was focused on referent power-related questions. Finally, the last section included questions relating to employee's sensitivity towards their superior experience influence. To mitigate Social Desirability Bias, the anonymity of respondents was guaranteed.

Studies of power relations in private firms point to service firms as a fertile ground for exploration (Handley et al., 2019), as unconventional forms of power resistance such as innovation (Mousavi et al., 2022) change management (Anderson-Gough et al., 2022), and resilience (Liu et al., 2022) have been proven to be success factors of firms itself. Moreover, the dynamics of gender inequality in Italy are to date the subject of much attention by scholars (Alderotti, 2022; Di Castro & Ferri, 2021) who have recognized their relevance for investigation.

4.3 Content Validity and Factor Analysis

Content validity refers to a correct definition of the domain of the latent variable that is going to be measured.

According to Lawshe (1975), to assess content validity the content validity ratio (CVR) can be employed. The content validity ratio offers information about item-level validity. A panel of experts is asked to rate items according to their relevance for the domain of the scale.

A 3-point rating system (1- item irrelevant, 2 - item important, but not essential, 3 - item essential) is used. For each item a CVR is computed, that is the proportion of experts that considered the items important or essential for the content of the scale. The following rationale has been employed to assess CVR:

$$CVR = \frac{n - I}{N}$$

where n - is the number of experts who considered the item to be “Essential” or “Important, but not essential”; I - is the number of experts who considered the item “Irrelevant”; N - the total number of experts employed. Eight experts (CEOs, superiors, managers) from service firm industries have taken part in the assessment. No items were discarded since the overall CVR index exceeded the minimum threshold $> 1,5$.

Factor analysis using maximum likelihood is performed using SPSS 25 and AMOS. In our study, the scales alpha coefficients possess a reliable index, as well as KMO and Bartlett sphericity tests for sample adequacy. Factor loadings largely meet the recommended range (≥ 0.6), therefore none of the items from the scales were discarded. Convergent validity was tested by calculating CR and AVE, which show values above 0.7 and 0.5, respectively, as suggested by Hair et al. (1997) and Fornell and Larcker (1981). In addition, verify the closeness of the factor structure to the empirical data, SEM-based goodness of fit measures is used (Green & Yang, 2009).

The Goodness of fit (GFI = 0.91), the standardized root means square residual (SRMR = 0.05) and the comparative fit index (CFI = 0.90) indicate a good fit of the model.

This procedure was used to choose a set of significant and reliable variables, and it is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Factor analysis

Factor	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE	KMO	Bartlett test	Cronbach's alpha
Coercive (Positional Power)	COE1 ,758	,840	,570	,781	,000	,899
	COE2 ,824					
	COE3 ,748					
	COE4 ,681					
Reference (Personal)	REF1 ,650	,809	,517	,721	,000	,878
	REF2 ,802					
	REF3 ,778					
	REF4 ,631					
Experience (Personal)	EXP1 ,901	,915	,729	,841	,000	,945
	EXP2 ,841					
	EXP3 ,870					
	EXP4 ,799					

Source: Dependent Variable: Coercive Power.

4.4 Results

The study seeks to investigate two multivariate models to estimate the impact of Legacy, Gender, and Control variables on Power. Model 1 addresses the impact that Personal Power has on Position Power, by employing Experience and Reference as independent variables and Coercive power as dependent variables. In Model 2, along with Personal Power, the role of gender as a suppressor of coercive power is also tested. Therefore, it is set as an independent variable and placed side by side with two control variables attributable to both socio-demographic and work attributes (professional experience as age and contract as permanent or temporary).

In Table 3, regression estimations and diagnostic parameters are presented, and show a good fit of the regression. Multi-collinearity between the variables is tested addressing the Tolerance and variable inflation factor (VIF). Test shows values lower than 2 both the two models, demonstrating the robustness of the distinction between the variables that make up the Personal Power (Model 1: Reference and Experience Tol. .896 VIF 1,110 both; Model 2 Tol. .859 and VIF 1,159for Experience - Tol. .871 and VIF 1,139 for Reference). Both the two Models possess significant R^2 (.246; .289) and f -value (21,018; 11,970).

As for Personal Power is concerned, both the two variables are related and significant for all the models. Although disposing of negative values (so agreeing on the answers), the first model (Experience $-.500$, $p < .01$; Reference $-.170$, $p < .01$) confirms that the more Expert and Referent power is exercised, the greater is the resistance to coercive power.

Therefore, relationships that result in legacy with superiors as reference or experience figures can mitigate the risk to escalate to coercion. This positive association also tends to be consistent with the second model where another independent variable and control variables were included. In fact, none of the three significantly reduces the Experience and Reference parameters, which remain unchanged (Experience $-.550$, $p < .01$; Reference $-.179$, $p < .01$).

Regarding socio-demographic variables in Model 2, the findings show interesting results. None of the control variables are found to be associated with coercive power, demonstrating that neither work experience nor work status (stable or precarious) determines greater-minor coercion in personal power between employee and superior (Contract $.056$, $p < .61$; Professional experience $.091$, $p < .501$).

Gender, on the other hand, has a determining effect in suppressing coercion. Although it does not act as a moderator of the relationship between personal and role power (since Experience and Reference β -value remained almost unchanged), regression analysis generated interesting evidence. The female sample in disagreement with the items on Coercive power (1 agree/5 disagree), confirmed the hypothesis that they are resistant to role power dynamics in a model in which personal power has positive values. In other words, women are shown to be inclined to establish relational bonds that fortify their relationship with their superiors when they are configured as reference points and expert models rather than coercive leaders. In other words, the more negative the gender value, the greater the ability to suppress the coercive power pivoting personal power (Gender: $-.689$, $p < .01$). Table 3 provides the results of the regression analysis.

Table 3. Regression investigation and diagnostic test results

Model	R^2	ANOVA f -value	Variable	β -value	Std.Error	t -value	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	.246	21,018	Experience	-.500	.082	-6,481	.000	.896	1,110
			Reference	-.170	.082	-1,940	.005	.896	1,110
2	.289	11,970	Experience	-.550	.078	7,200	.000	.859	1,159
			Reference	-.179	.078	1,909	.005	.871	1,139
			Gender	-.689	.112	-4,574	.000	.903	1,107
			Contract	.056	.170	.433	.610	.882	1,134
			Professional experience	.091	.171	.626	.501	.728	1,302

Note. ** $p \leq .01$ * $p \leq .05$; Dependent Variable: Coercive Power.

5. Discussions

The analysis brings to light some interesting dynamics that exist in the Personal, Positional and Gender conceptual bonds. The relational dimension of role and relations in power has already been investigated in the literature by several authors. Foucault famously stated, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1982: 95). Arguably, power is not exercised over passive subjects, but these react to it by finding a way to transform it. With the same lenses, Butler argued that power confers the subject with its own identity (Butler, 2007). Hence, there are dominating groups in organisations keen on maintaining their power in dealing with management phenomena, rather than in promoting organisational innovativeness (Maclean et al., 2014). From this perspective, it can be argued that organisations are, for instance, intrinsically gendered and there is wide acceptance of the fact that structures and systems within organisations benefit some groups over others so that social construction is seen as unchangeable.

In all cases, what is true is that a power-based relationship is made of two polar ends demonstrating a dynamic tension between the two polarities themselves. One polarity refers to the exercise of power; the other one, instead, regards power resistance. The latter, as previously argued in the theoretical background, triggers forms of consciousness by the side of those who, by sharing a common sense of oppression, feel to engage to resist power

in order to reveal oppression by their superiors/supervisors and raise awareness, at the same time. Building awareness to resistance means to understand how power is concentrated in the hands of the dominant groups so that it creates shared oppression and privilege. At this point, it is worth considering the form of feminist consciousness (Brown, 1994; Lerner, 1993) that consider the extent women can work together collectively and politically to create change. Hence, the collective and individual at one side, and the individual and collective at the other, holding the tension in a power-relationship dynamic.

The kernel of the truth about personalities in power is the focus on the functioning of power and power relations, which are essential in explaining social relations and the interaction of the subject with itself and with others. To make a meaningful organisational change in power dynamics means to challenge coercive power relations, especially those gender-biased, by taking personal action and by leveraging on softer and relational types of power. Similarly, mobilization of individual agency is important as it simultaneously gives a role to collective action. Moreover, it occurs that substantial and significant changes occurring within organisations modify the existing balance of power, accordingly. As argued, there is the case that forces seeking to maintain such a balance of power in and around the organisation may impede changes while other forces may fuel processes of change processes (Beer, 1988; Argyris, 1990; Kanter, 1993).

It has been argued, that working as active agents means to understand the constraints and limits imposed by the system of the organisations where individuals operate and consider strategies for changing structural relations aiming at increasing the Raven and French's personal type of power.

In this perspective, the regression results are in line with the hypotheses formulated, as it is found that role power, in its negative form (coercion), can be affected by personal power. Not surprisingly, the literature has argued that work dynamics marked by teamwork and cooperation (Coleman & Voronov, 2003) employee involvement (Frega & Kuhlmann, 2022), and participative leadership (Drenth et al., 2019) lead to the construction of strong, more horizontal ties, where the leader is recognized as such and can be both Referent and Expert.

Thus, change and innovation could take place if the relational side of power replaces the role power. There is no resistance to innovation when one considers that personal power has a relational nature.

Regarding gender, findings provide significant contributions to the literature as they demonstrate that women take an active role in advocating a relational, not role-based, bond to power. Indeed, the idea that they are subject to power dynamics inherent in the role played by the superior within the organisation is rejected. On the contrary, they are naturally predisposed to having a shield against coercion. Accordingly, the research conducted by Kovach (2021) on 155 full-time professionals surveyed, contributed to the current literature by starting from the analysis of the impact that power has on employees according to a gender perspective. Capitalising on supervisory skills using power dynamics inside workplaces and investigating employee efforts resulting from the gender supervisor-employee relationship, this research demonstrated a positive relationship between female supervisors who showed coercive power and greater employee effort. It also validated the hypothesis that gender stands as a factor enhancing or mitigating employee effort. This adds to arguments about women having a natural inclination to build relationship-based dynamics confirming the existence of a strong sensitivity towards "healthy" relation-building dynamics in workplaces as well as positive bonds and liaisons with other members (leaders and subalterns). Coercive power, hence, has no point to exist.

In conclusions, the study led to the confirmation of the research hypotheses formulated, the results of which are summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Summary of the research model

Hypotheses	Conditions	Results
<i>Hp1</i> : There is a significant correlation between Expert and Coercive power, in which the first positively influences the latter.	Expert (Personal Power) --> Coercive (Positional Power)	Accepted
<i>Hp2</i> : There is a significant correlation between Referent and Coercive power, in which the first positively influences the latter	Referent (Personal Power) ---> Coercive (Positional Power)	Accepted
<i>Hp3</i> : There is a significant correlation between the female Gender and Coercive Power, in which the first negatively influences the latter.	Gender (Female) ---> Coercive (Positional Power)	Accepted

6. Conclusions and Research Agenda

From a theoretical standpoint, this study represents an encouraging update on organisational power studies, focusing on the way different forms of power impact and coexist with each other. Furthermore, the originality of

this work lies in the will of framing power relationality, understood as personal power, to overcome the exercise of power as a form derived from the role supervisors. Lastly, this work aims to contribute to gender studies demonstrating the role and natural predisposition of women to relationality that facilitates establishing bonds that produce, among their superiors, forms of positive power.

Nevertheless, some limitations affect the research. First and foremost, the sample size and the convenience sampling technique that is employed. Second, this study considers specific scales of French and Raven, such as Coercive, Referent and Expert power, excluding the remaining ones. Other scales indicating additional power classifications were also not considered.

Thus, even if prior studies have investigated the correlations between different forms of power, their association is still challenging. The study investigates only some of the dimensions considered such as the relational one, and only some demographic characteristics in the regression model.

Furthermore, this research has not addressed employees' understanding of the concept of power, which includes their educational background, training, and expertise acquired through formal education or professional development. This decision was made to allow for a free and unbiased consideration of power by employees within service firms. However, future studies could explore this aspect by framing it as an additional variable that may have a significant effect on the regression of positional power.

To overcome these shortcomings, a systematic review of the literature will be conducted to get the full picture of the scales used to investigate power in organisational studies. In addition, much attention will be paid to new contributions investigating aspects such as innovation, change and resilience and the resistance of power towards them. Systematic sampling in future quantitative studies will be conducted in collaboration with Italian trade and labour associations, stressing even more the dynamics of southern Italy.

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Authors contributions

All authors were responsible for study design and revising. Dr Capolupo and Dr. Ricciardelli were responsible for data collection. All authors read and approved the final manuscript..

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