



Power distance in the workplace and its effect on prosocial behavioral intentions

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ABSTRACT

Power distance, the extent to which individuals in an organization accept unequal distributions of power, significantly influences workplace dynamics, particularly in shaping individuals' willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors. Previous research suggests that individuals with high levels of power distance tend to exhibit more self-centered behavior, making them less inclined to act charitably. In contrast, individuals with lower levels of power distance are more likely to engage in prosocial actions. This study investigates the effect of power distance on prosocial behavioral intentions in a workplace context and examines the moderating role of prosocial personality traits. A convenience sample of 169 employees from medium-sized enterprises was analyzed. The findings confirmed that participants with lower power distance perceptions exhibited significantly higher prosocial intentions and revealed the moderating role of prosocial personality traits. By examining the interaction between power distance beliefs, prosocial intentions, and prosocial dispositional traits, our study contributes new insights into how both structural beliefs and personality traits jointly shape prosocial intentions in organizational settings, potentially informing strategies to cultivate a supportive and collaborative work environment.

1. Introduction

The unequal distribution of power is a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary society, affecting numerous aspects of daily life, from family dynamics to corporate and governmental structures. This concept refers to the disparity in individuals' or groups' capacity to influence decisions, allocate resources, and determine outcomes. Such inequality manifests across various domains, including the workplace, education, politics, and interpersonal relationships (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010).

Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980) defines power distance as the degree to which less powerful individuals in an organization accept that power is distributed unequally. Those higher in perceived power distance tend to view social hierarchy as acceptable, expect large power differentials, and believe that inequalities among people in terms of pay, privilege, and status are normal, assuming that the less powerful can rely on those in power.

This study examines the relationship between perceptions of power distance and prosocial behaviors in work contexts. We hypothesize that

for individuals with a high perception of power distance, prosocial behavior may be at odds with maintaining social hierarchies. Conversely, those with a lower perception of power distance view hierarchy as unacceptable, advocate for equality, and anticipate minimal power disparities. As a result, these individuals may be more predisposed to engage in prosocial behavior to promote equitable outcomes. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to ascertain whether individuals with different levels of perceived power distance exhibit different degrees of prosocial intention. Furthermore, we propose that a stable personal tendency toward prosociality may moderate this relationship between power distance and prosocial behavior, indicating the necessity for a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon.

1.1. Theoretical background

Research on power distance is grounded in the pioneering work of Geert Hofstede, who explored how different cultures handle power inequalities in organizations and society (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 2001). Power distance reflects the degree of acceptance by less powerful

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members of a society regarding power and authority inequalities. It pertains to the tolerance for hierarchy and inequality among group or community members (Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede describes power distance as a dimension that varies significantly across cultures: some societies perceive power inequalities as a natural and accepted aspect of social and organizational life whereas others strive for equality and minimize power level differences. The Power-Distance Index (PDI) measures the acceptance of a power hierarchy by individuals in a nation, culture, or organization, providing insight into the extent to which subordinates accept or challenge authority (Hofstede, 1993). The PDI ultimately provides insight into the extent to which regular citizens, or subordinates, accept or challenge the authority of the person or people in charge. This is inequality (more versus less) defined from below, not above. High power distance cultures are typified by pronounced hierarchies and control mechanisms, limited communication across organizational levels, and constrained opportunities for upward social mobility (Hofstede, 1993).

Although Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980) contended that cultural values should be analyzed at the societal level, several scholars have highlighted these values' significance at the individual level (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006). Kirkman et al. (Kirkman et al., 2006) conducted a review of empirical research and discovered that studies on Hofstede's cultural values at the individual level outnumber those at the societal level. Power distance at the individual level therefore refers to the degree to which an individual accepts and endorses the unequal distribution of power in institutions and organizations (Clugston, 2000; Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009; Winterich & Zhang, 2014).

Hofstede's work has inspired numerous subsequent studies exploring power distance's implications in different contexts, particularly the workplace. Power distance in an organizational context assesses the perceived disparity in power between leaders and subordinates (Hofstede, 2001; Mulder, 1977). Individuals who strongly endorse high power distance are more likely to accept power inequalities (Ng, Sorensen, & Yim, 2009), support hierarchical structures, and believe that subordinates should demonstrate trust and obedience toward their superiors (Kirkman et al., 2009; Schiller & Cui, 2010). Behaviorally, those with high power distance beliefs tend to exhibit lower levels of trust in others (Ji, Zhou, Li, & Yan, 2015), seek more feedback from peers than from superiors (Hwang & Francesco, 2010), and show a reduced inclination toward innovation. Individuals with strong beliefs in power distance typically demonstrate a supportive and deferential attitude toward leaders, often refraining from taking initiative (Wang, Wen, Liu, Jiang, & Huai, 2023). In cultures characterized by high power distance, leaders hold significant sway as career "gatekeepers" (King, 2004). Consequently, individuals striving for professional success must seek guidance from their superiors. Financial achievement holds considerable prestige in such cultures, symbolizing an individual's social status, and its pursuit is widely accepted. In contrast, efforts to promote work-life balance may be marginalized and perceived as a lower priority. Conversely, organizations in low power distance cultures tend to decentralize decision-making, with subordinates expecting to be consulted and authority figures serving as sources of democratic guidance (Hofstede, 1993).

Power distance significantly shapes workplace dynamics, influencing factors such as trust, feedback seeking, innovation, and proactive behavior (Begley, Lee, Fang, & Li, 2002; Chiu, Owens, & Tesluk, 2016; Wang, Wang, Fang, & Jiang, 2018). Individuals who adhere to minimal power distance beliefs are more likely to assert their opinions and take proactive initiatives (Chiu et al., 2016). Moreover, those characterized by low power-distance orientations demonstrate reduced differentiation based on rank or social position (Begley et al., 2002; Wang et al., 2018).

Power distance also dictates the extent to which employees are influenced by their leaders in the workplace. In settings where leaders exhibit a high power distance orientation, employees tend to acknowledge and comply with their authority. Conversely, workplaces characterized by a low power distance orientation foster expectations of

harmonious relationships between leaders and subordinates, emphasizing frequent interactions between them (Peltokorpi, 2019). Therefore, employees' responsiveness to leaders' actions hinges on the leaders' stance on power distance (Wang et al., 2018). Furthermore, prior research indicates that power distance serves as a moderating factor in various relationships, including those involving empowerment and team participation (Zhang & Begley, 2011), transformational leadership and procedural justice (Kirkman et al., 2009), and abusive supervision's impact on employee well-being (Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2013). Finally, individuals with a low power distance orientation actively engage in proactive organizational activities and expect a fair distribution of power (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010). For instance, Hu et al. (Hu, Erdogan, Jiang, Bauer, & Liu, 2018) found that supervisors creating a supportive atmosphere effectively reduces uncertainty and encourages proactive behaviors among employees. Similarly, Zhang and Bartol (Zhang & Bartol, 2010) documented that implementing spiritual leadership characterized by low power distance positively influences proactive behaviors by motivating employees to generate innovative ideas and express them constructively. Conversely, high power distance has been identified as a constraint on employees' proactive behavior (Guo, Zhu, & Zhang, 2022).

1.2. Power distance and prosocial behavior

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between power distance and prosocial behavior (de Kort et al., 2010; Guo, Liu, Li, & Qiao, 2018; Luria, Cnaan, & Boehm, 2015; Stamkou et al., 2019). Following the consolidated literature, we broadly define "prosocial" as any behavior intended to benefit others (Caprara et al., 2012; Eisenberg & Shell, 1986). This definition extends beyond actions such as helping, caring, and sharing. It encompasses a particular inclination to engage with others' emotional experiences, an awareness of the impact of one's actions, and behaviors that occur independently of formal roles. Prosocial behaviors frequently target individuals with fewer resources, and an individual's normative beliefs regarding inequality and hierarchy in society can influence their inclination to act generously toward the less fortunate (Scaffidi Abbate, Ruggieri, & Boca, 2013). Most studies, in line with the work on cultural dimensions Hofstede proposed, considered this relationship at the cross-national level, examining differences across cultures and comparing countries with low and high power distance. For example, Luria et al. (Luria et al., 2015) and Guo et al. (Guo et al., 2018) found a negative association between country-level power distance and prosocial behavior. Kort et al. (de Kort et al., 2010) found that power distance negatively predicted blood donations at the country level. Gelfand et al. (Gelfand et al., 2011) investigated cultural variations in tightness-looseness, a construct related to power distance, and its implications for prosocial behavior. They explored how societal norms regarding tolerance for deviation influence individuals' tendencies to engage in prosocial actions, such as helping strangers and volunteering.

In contrast, studies on how power distance at the individual level may relate to prosocial behavior are less numerous. Chen et al. (Chen et al., 2016) examined the psychological mechanisms driving individuals' reactions to globalization, particularly focusing on their attitudes toward power distance and prosocial behavior. They introduced a conceptual model that merges cultural, social, and cognitive elements, which shape individuals' orientations toward global norms and values, highlighting implications for cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. Kiyonari et al. (Kiyonari, Tanida, & Yamagishi, 2000) studied bounded generalized reciprocity, a social exchange phenomenon impacted by factors such as power distance and group membership. They explored how perceptions of group boundaries and power differences influence individuals' willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors, such as aiding members of their ingroup versus their outgroup. Winterich and Zhang (Winterich & Zhang, 2014) investigated how power distance beliefs affect prosocial behavior and the willingness to take responsibility for addressing social inequalities. They discovered

that individuals with high power distance beliefs are less inclined to take responsibility for addressing social inequalities through prosocial actions, underscoring the significant role of power distance belief in shaping attitudes and behaviors toward societal well-being. Other researchers, such as Chiu et al. (Chiu et al., 2016), have found that individuals with low power distance beliefs are more likely to express their opinions and take initiatives proactively. Furthermore, those with low power distance orientations tend to show less differentiation based on rank or social position (Begley et al., 2002; Wang et al., 2018). Finally, Han et al. (Han, Lalwani, & Duhachek, 2017) found that the impact of power distance beliefs is contingent on the donor's power. In contexts with low power distance beliefs, individuals with high psychological power (compared to those with low power) tend to be more self-focused and, consequently, less charitable. Conversely, in high power distance beliefs contexts, those with high psychological power are more other-focused and, therefore, more charitable.

1.3. The present study

This study focuses on the relationships between power distance and prosocial behavior in work contexts. Previous research has demonstrated that diversity in power distance within workgroups can have significant effects on both performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. For instance, Durán-Brizuela et al. (Durán-Brizuela, Brenes-Leiva, Solís-Salazar, & Torres-Carballo, 2016) examined the impact of power distance diversity among workgroups on work role performance and organizational citizenship behavior. Their primary findings suggest that increased diversity in power distance in workgroups correlates negatively with work performance and diminishes two dimensions of organizational citizenship behavior: altruism and civic virtue. Additional research has shown that a high power distance perception contributes to ineffective communication (Dai, Li, Xie, & Deng, 2022) and inhibits communicative openness among individuals, thereby impeding information exchange. Ji et al. (Ji et al., 2015) observed that individuals with a high perception of power distance are less inclined to seek assistance. Similarly, Varela and Premeaux (Varela & Premeaux, 2008) found that subordinates with high power distance tendencies are more reticent and less inclined to offer feedback.

We aim to advance this line of research by exploring the impact of power distance on prosocial intentions in the workplace. Our objective is to build upon previous findings by examining how perceptions of power distance may impede prosocial behavioral intentions within organizational contexts. Therefore, our first hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H1. Power distance is a predictor of prosocial intentions, with higher levels of power distance associated with lower levels of prosocial intentions.

A growing body of research concerns how prosocial personality traits influence helping behaviors in workplace settings (King, George, & Hebl, 2005; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Based on the existing literature, it is anticipated that personality traits are pivotal in guiding behavior in “weak” or ambiguous situations where situational constraints are minimal (Mischel, 1977; Organ, 1994). In such contexts, individuals have greater freedom to express themselves and act in alignment with their inherent predispositions, tendencies, or traits. In many organizational contexts, interpersonal help occurs in what Mischel (Mischel, 1977) categorizes as relatively weak situations. Although there are professions in which general helping behaviors are explicitly part of the role, workers are typically not mandated to voluntarily assist a colleague encountering difficulties with an assignment, task, computer program, or equipment. Nonetheless, these acts of assistance play a crucial role in maintaining the organization's smooth functioning and

have been associated with positive organizational outcomes (Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997; Walz & Niehoff, 2000). Yet, studies examining the relationship between prosocial traits and extra-role behaviors, such as helping, have yielded varied findings. Some studies have shown weak relationships (Organ & Ryan, 1995), whereas others have found more consistent associations. For instance, Penner et al. (Penner, Hökkä, & Penttilä, 1995) utilized the Prosocial Personality Battery to assess prosocial personality traits and found significant correlations with citizenship performance, particularly with traits such as empathy and willingness to help. Midili and Penner (Midili & Penner, 1995) observed similar results in a study involving employees of a large organization in the home improvement sector, in which positive correlations were found among prosocial traits, job satisfaction, perceptions of organizational justice, and mood. Negrao (Negrao, 1997) replicated these findings among mid-level managers in a food service organization. Further supporting evidence of the role of prosocial traits comes from Fecteau et al. (Fecteau, Allen, Fecteau, Bordas, & Tears, 2000).

Building on these findings and aligning with our research focus, this study intends to explore whether prosocial personality traits moderate the relationship between power distance and prosocial behavior in the workplace. By exploring how these traits interact with power dynamics, we aim to enhance our understanding of the conditions that foster the expression of prosocial behavior, thereby contributing to the organizational benefits emphasized in previous research.

Our reflection is rooted in the assumption that individuals with high levels of prosocial traits are more inclined to engage in helping behaviors, even when their beliefs about power distance foster hierarchical expectations that might otherwise inhibit such actions. In other words, prosocial traits may function as ‘internal resources’ that mitigate the constraining effects of high power distance beliefs, enabling individuals to overcome these limitations and engage in supportive behaviors regardless of hierarchical expectations (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Conversely, for individuals with low levels of prosocial traits, high power distance is likely to further constrain prosocial behavior. In the absence of a strong internal drive to assist others, such individuals may be more susceptible to being ‘restrained’ by their beliefs about power distribution. Thus, the lack of prosocial traits amplifies the difficulty of overcoming the barriers imposed by emphasized hierarchical beliefs.

In summary, we hypothesize that prosocial traits may moderate the influence of power distance on prosocial intentions, acting as buffers against the restrictive effects of strong beliefs in high power distance and enabling individuals to express supportive behaviors to a certain extent. Among individuals characterized by low power distance, the influence of prosociality-related personality traits on prosocial behavior may not be significant. Therefore, our second hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H2. Prosocial-related personality traits moderate the effect of the relationship between power distance and prosocial behavioral intentions. Specifically, the negative impact of high power distance on prosocial behavior is stronger among those with low prosocial personality traits compared to those with high prosocial personality traits.

In conclusion, our study makes a twofold contribution. First, building upon previous findings (e.g., Ji et al., 2015; Varela & Premeaux, 2008), it consolidates existing literature by examining how individuals with varying levels of power distance beliefs demonstrate differing degrees of prosocial intentions within workplace settings. Second, it introduces prosocial personality traits as a moderating factor, aiming to assess whether individual dispositional characteristics can mitigate or amplify the impact of power distance on prosocial intentions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The study involved a convenience sample of 169 employees from medium-sized Italian enterprises (age: mean = 43.23, sd = 12.14; gender distribution: 39 females, 128 males, two participants preferred not to specify). The administration took place online after the HR department head of the enterprises granted the authorization. Participants received no compensation in exchange for completing the survey questions. The first page of the questionnaire contained a brief description, which included the duration of the questionnaire, the expression of informed consent, the measurement scales, and a thank you for participating in the study. Participants were later informed about the real aims of the study, and we answered general and specific questions on the study during the debriefing. The data collected were anonymous, and all participants provided written informed consent. All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the Helsinki Declaration.

2.2. Measures

Sociodemographic data. The study collected the following socio-demographic information: age and gender identity.

2.2.1. Power distance

Power distance was measured using Hofstede's 5-item Power Distance Scale (Earley & Erez, 1997). This scale has been used in multiple studies to assess the perception of power inequality in organizations and focuses on the extent to which less powerful members of an organization accept and expect power to be distributed unequally. The scale comprises 5 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). An example item is "Employees should follow their superiors' instructions without asking questions." The reliability observed in our study was 0.80.

2.2.2. Prosocial-related personality trait

Prosocial personality tendencies were assessed using the Prosocialness Scale for Adults, developed by Caprara et al. (Caprara, Steca, Zelli, & Capanna, 2005). The scale comprises 16 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). A sample item is "I am pleased to help my friends/colleagues in their activities." The reliability observed in our study was 0.91.

2.2.3. Prosocial behavioral intentions

Prosocial intentions toward colleagues at work were measured by adapting the Prosocial Behavioral Intentions Scale, developed by Baumsteiger and Siegel (Baumsteiger & Siegel, 2019). The scale includes a series of items that describe various scenarios in which a person might act prosocially. Participants indicate how likely they are to act in each of these scenarios. The scenarios were contextualized in a work environment. An example item is "If a colleague needed to talk, I would offer them my support." A 5-point Likert scale showed the extent to which the employees agreed with the statements given, which ranged from 1 (denoting not at all) to 5 (denoting a very great extent). The reliability observed in our study was 0.87.

2.3. Data analysis

First, we conducted statistical preliminary analyses, such as reliability analyses, descriptive statistics, and correlations. The values for asymmetry and kurtosis ranged between -1 and $+1$, showing normal univariate distribution (Kline, 2016). Next, independent samples *t*-tests were performed to examine potential gender differences in the study variables. Subsequently, we tested the effect of power distance on

prosocial intentions (H1). Finally, we conducted a moderation analysis where power distance was treated as the predictor, prosocial intention as the outcome variable, and prosocial-related personality traits as the moderator (H2).¹ All the analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25 and the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive, correlations, and gender differences

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among all the study variables are reported in Table 1. A significant negative correlation was found between power distance and prosocial-related personality traits ($r = -0.49$, $p < .01$) and between power distance and prosocial intentions ($r = -0.52$, $p < .01$). Conversely, a significant positive correlation was observed between prosocial-related personality traits and prosocial intentions ($r = 0.63$, $p < .01$). These correlations indicate that as power distance increases, prosocial-related personality traits and prosocial intentions decrease whereas greater prosocial-related personality traits are associated with greater prosocial intentions. Further, the results indicated that age did not significantly correlate with any of the measured variables.

To examine potential gender differences in the study variables (power distance, prosocial behavior, and prosocial intentions), independent samples *t*-tests were conducted with gender as the grouping variable. The results showed no significant differences between male and female participants across measured variables.² Given these findings, the variables gender and age were excluded from further analyses to maintain parsimony in the models and to focus on the primary predictors and moderators of interest.

3.2. Linear regression analysis

To investigate H1, which hypothesizes how variations in power distance influence participants' prosocial intentions, a linear regression analysis was conducted. In this model, the predictor variable was power distance, and the dependent variable was prosocial intention. The

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables.

	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Age	43.23	12.14	–			
2. Power distance	10.75	4.44	0.002	–		
3. Prosocial related personality trait	59.12	10.37	–0.064	–0.492*	–	
4. Prosocial intention	11.49	2.99	–0.005	–0.522*	0.633*	–

Note: $N = 169$. * $p < .01$.

¹ Sample Size: For the linear regression examining the relationship between power distance and prosocial behavioral intentions, we anticipated a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$). With a significance level (α) of 0.05 and a statistical power of 0.80, the required sample size for a single predictor was estimated to be 55 participants. For the moderated regression analysis, which included two main predictors (power distance and prosocial personality traits) and their interaction, we also considered a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), with a significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) and a power of 0.80. The power analysis recommended a minimum sample size of 77 participants. The final sample of 169 participants was deemed sufficient to detect moderate effects and ensure the robustness of the analysis.

² Power Distance: male ($M = 11.06$, $SD = 4.53$), female ($M = 9.92$, $SD = 4.33$), $t(162) = 1.35$, $p = .08$. Prosocial Behavior: males ($M = 59.23$, $SD = 10.38$), females ($M = 59.72$, $SD = 10.06$), $t(162) = -0.25$, $p = .80$. Prosocial Intentions: males ($M = 11.35$, $SD = 3.05$), females ($M = 11.86$, $SD = 2.97$), $t(162) = -0.89$, $p = .37$.

overall model was statistically significant, $F(1, 167) = 62.45, p < .001$, indicating that power distance significantly predicts prosocial intentions. The adjusted R-squared value was 0.268, meaning that almost 27 % of the variance in intention is explained by power distance. The unstandardized coefficient for power distance was $B = -0.352$ ($SE = 0.045$), with a standardized beta coefficient (β) of -0.522 . This suggests that as power distance increases, there is a significant negative effect on prosocial intention ($t = -7.90, p < .001$). The findings suggest that power distance is a significant predictor of prosocial intentions, with higher levels of power distance associated with lower levels of prosocial intentions.

3.3. Moderate regression analysis

To investigate H2, which posits that prosocial-related personality traits moderate power distance's effect on prosocial intentions, a moderation analysis was conducted using Model 1 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018). In this model, power distance was considered the predictor variable, prosocial intentions the dependent variable, and the altruism-related personality trait the moderator. The results show a negative main effect of power distance on prosocial intentions ($\beta = -0.11, p = .010$). We also found a significant positive effect of the prosocial-related personality trait on prosocial intentions ($\beta = 0.09, p < .001$). More importantly, the interaction between power distance and the prosocial-related personality trait was significant ($\beta = 0.01, p < .001$), indicating that the prosocial trait moderates the relationship between power distance and prosocial intentions. The analysis indicated that the overall model was significant ($R^2 = 0.52, F(3, 165) = 61.29, p < .001$). The change in variance explained due to the interaction was significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.068, F(1, 165) = 23.62, p < .001$). Table 2 provides an overview of the regression analysis results.

Power distance's conditional effects on prosocial intentions were analyzed at various levels of the prosocial trait (mean \pm SD), revealing that the effect is negative and significant at low and medium levels but not at high levels. Specifically, at low levels of the prosocial-related trait (score = -7.12), power distance had a significant negative effect on prosocial intentions (Effect = $-0.20, p = .000$). At medium levels (score = 1.87), the effect remained negative but less pronounced (Effect = $-0.09, p = .048$). At high levels (score = 8.87), power distance did not significantly affect prosocial intentions (Effect = $-0.004, p = .94$) (Fig. 1).

This suggests that when individuals exhibit high levels of prosocial traits, the perception of power distance becomes less relevant in determining their prosocial intentions. Conversely, at low or medium levels of prosocial traits, power distance becomes a significant predictor of the intentions to behave prosocially. In summary, the results indicate that the level of prosociality effectively moderates perceived power distance's impact on prosocial intentions, highlighting the importance of considering individual characteristics alongside organizational perceptions in promoting prosocial behaviors in organizations.

4. Discussion

The present study explored the effect of power distance perception on prosocial intentions, moderated by prosocial personality traits. The results suggest that power distance negatively influences prosocial

intentions, but the prosocial traits significantly moderates this effect. Individuals with high prosocial traits show a less pronounced influence of power distance on their prosocial intentions. This suggests that when a person is intrinsically altruistic, the perception of power distance becomes less relevant in determining his or her prosocial actions. In contrast, at low or medium levels of altruism, power distance emerges as a significant predictor of prosocial intentions. This indicates that in the absence of strong altruistic traits, perceived hierarchical structure may hinder prosocial behaviors.

These tendencies can be explained by several factors. We know that individuals high in power distance tendencies prefer hierarchical structures and superiors' authority (Wei, Sun, Liu, Zhou, & Xue, 2017). They are more likely to show obedience and deference to those in positions of power, often at the expense of peer relationships and mutual support among colleagues. This emphasis on hierarchy may lead to less attention to colleagues' needs and well-being because individuals with high power distance may perceive helping behaviors as outside their formal role or as a potential challenge to the established order (Durán-Brizuela et al., 2016; Winterich & Zhang, 2014).

In addition, individuals with a high power-distance perception often internalize beliefs that justify social inequalities and resource disparities (Raub & Robert, 2010). They may view these inequalities as natural and acceptable, which reduces their motivation to engage in behaviors aimed at leveling the playing field or supporting disadvantaged colleagues. This acceptance of inequality may manifest as a weaker propensity for altruistic actions because individuals with a high power distance may consider it unnecessary or even inappropriate to provide help or resources to subordinates or colleagues (Begley et al., 2002). In general, individuals with high power distance scores may exhibit less prosocial behavior because they tend to place a strong emphasis on hierarchical structures and respect for authority figures, prioritizing obedience and deference to those in positions of power, which may lead to less attention to the needs and well-being of others, especially those perceived to be lower in the social hierarchy (Durán-Brizuela et al., 2016; Winterich & Zhang, 2014). In addition, individuals with high power distance scores may internalize beliefs that justify social inequalities and resource disparities. They may view such inequalities as natural and acceptable, leading to less motivation to engage in altruistic behaviors aimed at leveling the playing field or supporting those in need.

The relationship described here is especially evident in subjects with low prosocial traits. On the contrary, in subjects with high altruistic traits, the association between power distance tendencies and prosocial behavior intention tends not to manifest itself. Subjects with very strong altruistic traits in work organizations tend to show a strong intention to commit help behavior regardless of the level of power distance. In fact, there is a lot of research that demonstrates the association between the altruistic personality trait and helping behavior even in organizations (Lee & Lee, 2010). What happens is that power distance and prosocial personality tendencies act in opposite ways with respect to prosocial behavioral intention: where there are tendencies toward prosociality, a prosocial behavioral intention is put into action, and where it is possible to observe a high level of power distance, we have a low level of prosocial behavioral intention.

Table 2
Regression analysis summary.

Model	Predictor	B (SE)	β	p-value	$R^2 / \Delta R^2$	F
Linear Regression	Power Distance	-0.352 (0.045)	-0.522	< 0.001	0.268	62.45
Moderated Regression	Power Distance	-0.11 (0.043)	-0.11	0.010	0.52	61.29
Moderated Regression	Prosocial Traits	0.09 (0.025)	0.09	< 0.001	0.52	61.29
Moderated Regression	Interaction (Power Distance x Prosocial Traits)	0.01 (0.002)	0.01	< 0.001	0.68	23.62

Note. B = Unstandardized Coefficients; SE = Standard Error; β = Standardized Coefficients (Beta); p-value = Significance; $R^2, \Delta R^2, F$ = Model fit statistics.

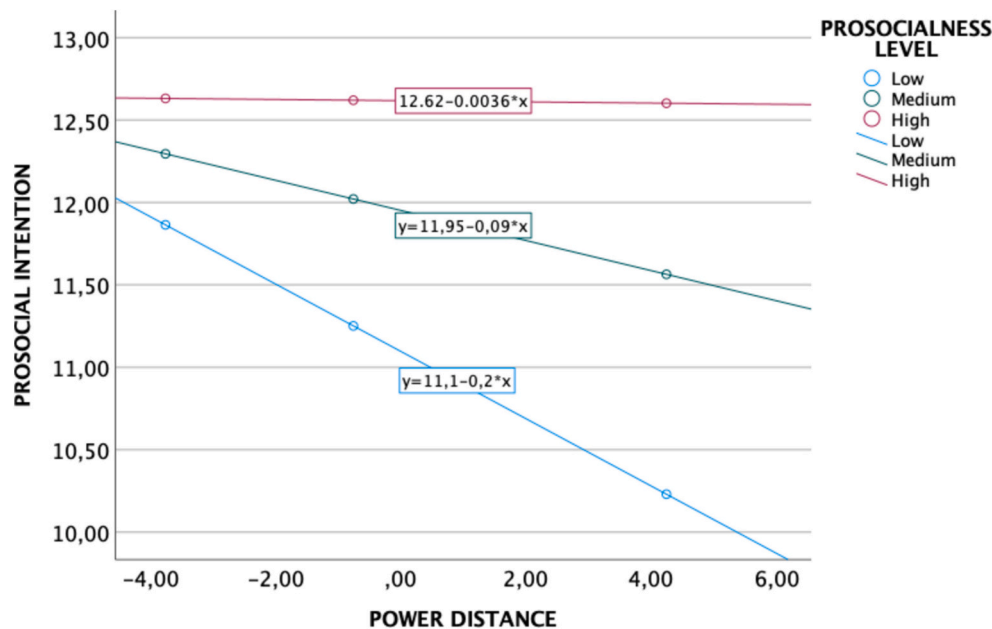


Fig. 1. Interaction plot showing the moderating effect of altruism-related personality traits on the relationship between power distance and altruistic intentions. The lines represent high (+1 SD), medium, and low (-1 SD) levels of altruism-related personality traits.

4.1. Limitations and future research

Despite our theoretical implications, our study presents certain limitations that should be considered in the interpretation of findings. Firstly, the study included a convenience sample, and the nonrandom sampling procedure may not accurately represent the overall population, limiting our findings' generalizability. Hence, future research must replicate the findings using a more representative sample. In addition, the sample displayed an imbalance in gender representation, which may have implications for the generalizability of the results. Future research should ensure a balanced gender composition to better capture potential differences in behavioral patterns across genders and enhance the reliability of the findings. Secondly, we measured participants' behavioral intentions rather than their actual prosocial behaviors. It is well-established that intentions are important determinants of behavior (Greitemeyer, 2009; Nelson & Norton, 2005; Pichon, Boccatto, & Saroglou, 2007; Scaffidi Abbate, Boca, Spadaro, & Romano, 2014). Behavioral intentions are, in fact, central to a range of theories regarding the determinants of behavior and action. For instance, intentions are the sole proximal determinant of action in the Reasoned Action Approach (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) and Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 1983), while they are one of several proximal determinants of behavior in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997) and the Health Action Process Approach (Schwarzer & Renner, 2015). These models converge on the notion that the most immediate and significant predictor of a person's behavior is their intention to perform it. Nevertheless, intentions rarely, if ever, explain all the variance in behavior—this is widely known as the intention-behavior gap (Conner & Norman, 2022; Sheeran, 2002). Therefore, future studies should also include behavioral measures of prosocial variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Thirdly, the present study adopted self-report instruments, which can be influenced by social desirability bias. To mitigate potential biases, it is recommended that researchers make every attempt to use behavioral measures.

Future studies should also explore whether individuals with high power distance tend to internalize social inequalities, justifying disparities in resources as natural. This acceptance could reduce motivation to engage in altruistic behavior because such individuals may see mutual aid as unnecessary or inappropriate. Understanding these dynamics can

help develop corporate policies that aim to balance opportunity and promote inclusiveness, reducing passive acceptance of inequality.

It might be useful to examine specific interventions that can mitigate the negative effects of power distance, such as promoting inclusive leadership and creating more egalitarian work environments.

5. Conclusion

The present study highlights the importance of considering individual characteristics and organizational perceptions in promoting prosocial behaviors in an organizational context. Highlighting these links' importance is of fundamental importance for organizations, which can benefit from recognizing and adapting these dynamics to create a more positive and cooperative work environments. Promoting an organizational culture that values altruism and reduces perceived power distance can foster a more collaborative and supportive work environment.

Organizations should consider not only hierarchical structures and power dynamics but also the individual traits of employees in promoting prosocial behaviors. Organizational development strategies could include training programs to enhance altruistic traits and interventions to reduce the emphasis on power distance.

Additionally, implementing leadership practices that emphasize empathy, equity, and inclusive communication can counterbalance the negative effects of high power distance. For instance, training leaders to actively recognize and reward prosocial behaviors can encourage a culture where altruism thrives regardless of hierarchical perceptions. These efforts could further be supplemented with policies designed to encourage peer collaboration and create opportunities for employees at all levels to voice their concerns and suggestions.

In addition, power distance's impact on altruism may vary depending on the type of organizational structure and sector. For example, in highly hierarchical sectors, such as finance and defense, power distance's effects on altruism may be more pronounced than in more egalitarian sectors, such as technology and creative industries. Understanding these nuances can help organizations adapt their strategies to foster a culture of altruism that aligns with their specific power distance dynamics (Wang et al., 2018).

In summary, the relationship between altruism and individual power distance in work contexts is complex and multifaceted. High power-

distance perceptions tend to inhibit prosocial behaviors due to their emphasis on hierarchy and acceptance of inequality whereas low power-distance perceptions promote altruism through egalitarian values and mutual support. The inclusion of tailored interventions and leadership development strategies will further aid in bridging the gap between hierarchical perceptions and prosocial intentions, ensuring that organizations achieve both inclusivity and operational excellence. Organizational culture and industry-specific factors further influence this relationship, highlighting the importance of context in understanding and promoting altruism in the workplace.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Costanza Scaffidi Abbate: Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Rubinia Celeste Bonfanti:** Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Stefano Ruggieri:** Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Raffaella Misuraca:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Consent for publication

The details of any images, videos, recordings, etc. can be published, and the person(s) provided consent have been shown the article contents to be published.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this paper, the authors used ChatGPT to correct and improve the English text. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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