

When Your Creativity Reflects on Me We Psychologically Bond

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ABSTRACT

This theory paper develops reflective power as a proposed dimension of psychological bonding in creative environments shaped by hierarchy and dependence. Drawing on resource dependence theory and psychological safety as its two formal anchors, the paper argues that safety alone cannot explain whether an innovator's growth will remain relationally welcome once that growth begins to reflect on the identity and authority of those above them. To address that gap, the paper distinguishes constrained resources from withheld resources and defines reflective power as the visible alignment between a leader's values, conduct, credit allocation, and developmental use of asymmetry. Psychological bonding is introduced as a stronger condition than psychological safety, one in which safety is joined to durable mutual investment, nondefensive recognition, and confidence that growth will not dissolve belonging. Three hypothetical cases show how reflective power can foster innovation in constrained environments and why it matters for theory, policy, and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Creativity and innovation do not unfold in socially neutral spaces. They are judged, sponsored, delayed, and implemented inside relationships of dependence in which some actors control critical resources, legitimacy, access, and narrative authority. Resource dependence theory has shown that organizations respond to external uncertainty by seeking autonomy and legitimacy, while psychological safety research has shown that learning and innovation depend on whether people believe they can take interpersonal risks without shame or retaliation (Edmondson, 1999; Hillman et al., 2009; Drees & Heugens, 2013). At the same time, the literature leaves an important gap. We know much about scarcity, dependence, and voice, but we know less about what happens when one person's creativity begins to reflect back on the image, identity, or symbolic standing of the person above them. In many innovative settings, creative work becomes difficult not because ideas are absent, but because originality changes who appears central, prescient, or substitutable in the social order (Anderson et al., 2014; Zhou & Hoever, 2014).

The research question of this paper is therefore focused and explicit. How can resource dependence theory and psychological safety be extended to explain when creativity under asymmetry produces development and mutual attachment rather than suppression, containment, or thin cooperation. This question contains three subordinate questions. First, how should we distinguish genuinely constrained environments from environments in which resources are strategically withheld. Second, why is psychological safety necessary but insufficient for long horizon innovation when hierarchy remains present. Third, what kind of power use best enables a superior actor to support the growth of innovators without converting their dependence into a theater of status preservation. By asking these questions, the paper shifts from a narrow concern with speaking up to a broader concern with whether one's growth remains welcome once it becomes consequential (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017; Morrison, 2011).

The theoretical framing is intentionally narrow. The paper uses resource dependence theory and psychological safety as its two formal foundations. Resource dependence theory explains how control over critical resources creates asymmetries that shape action, legitimacy, and autonomy seeking behavior (Hillman et al., 2009; Drees & Heugens, 2013). Psychological safety explains how interpersonal risk perceptions shape voice, learning, questioning, and experimentation in teams and organizations (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). I extend these frameworks through two proposed concepts. Reflective power refers to the visible alignment between what a higher power actor says, what that actor permits, how that actor allocates developmental

resources, and how that actor responds when others grow. Psychological bonding refers to a stronger relational condition than psychological safety alone, one built from safety, belonging, identification, and mutual developmental investment. In short, psychological safety asks whether I can speak here. Psychological bonding asks whether my fuller development will still be wanted here (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kahn, 1990).

Methodologically, this is a theory development paper. It does not test hypotheses, estimate effects, or present new empirical data. Instead, it synthesizes a focused body of work from top management, organizational behavior, and psychology journals and develops a conceptual extension through disciplined comparison and mechanism building. The paper then uses three detailed hypothetical cases to show how the proposed concepts travel across very different contexts. This methodology is appropriate because the literature already explains important portions of the phenomenon, but it does not yet offer a coherent language for the moment in which creativity becomes socially difficult because it reflects on the power holder rather than merely depending on them. Theory development is especially useful in exactly such situations, where the constructs are proximate but the pattern remains undertheorized (Anderson et al., 2014; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017).

The intended contributions are threefold. To theory, the paper introduces reflective power and psychological bonding as extensions that more tightly connect dependence, safety, belonging, and innovation. To policy, it offers a language for leadership development, apprenticeship design, workforce systems, and organizational governance in environments where innovation depends on reducing arbitrary dependence rather than merely demanding creativity. To practice, it provides a diagnostic framework for leaders and mentors who must ask not only what outcomes they can secure, but what their conduct teaches others about what power is for. In an era in which innovators increasingly work with more information, more visibility, and greater autonomy than earlier generations, that question is not peripheral. It is central to whether institutions produce compliant performers or durable future stewards of power (Bandura, 2001; Tyler, 2006; van Knippenberg, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resource dependence theory remains one of the strongest ways to explain why power imbalances persist even in contexts that celebrate innovation rhetorically. Hillman et al. (2009) describe the theory as an explanation for how organizations reduce environmental interdependence and uncertainty, and Drees and Heugens (2013) show through meta analysis that organizations respond to resource dependencies by forming arrangements that increase autonomy and legitimacy. The relevance for creativity is immediate. Dependence is not only a material condition. It is also a political condition. Actors who control time, attention, sponsorship, budgets, information, or access to implementation space shape what others can do, how quickly they can do it, and whether their work becomes legible as value rather than noise. The literature therefore establishes a basic point that this paper accepts. Innovation under hierarchy is always partly a problem of resource structure and asymmetry (Hillman et al., 2009; Drees & Heugens, 2013).

Classical power dependence work adds an important relational nuance. Emerson (1962) argued that power resides in dependence relations, and later work by Casciaro and Piskorski (2005) showed that power imbalance and mutual dependence together influence strategic behavior in exchange relationships. This matters because highly creative settings are often characterized by a paradoxical mix of mutuality and asymmetry. The subordinate innovator may need the superior's approval, while the superior increasingly needs the subordinate's originality for adaptation, legitimacy, or performance. Where that asymmetry is managed defensively, dependence becomes a means of containment. Where it is managed developmentally, dependence becomes a temporary scaffold for autonomy. This distinction sets up the paper's later move from dependence as leverage to dependence as fiduciary responsibility.

Psychological safety research explains why innovation also depends on the interpersonal interpretation of power. Edmondson (1999) defined team psychological safety as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking and showed that such safety is associated with learning behavior. Edmondson and Lei (2014) later positioned psychological safety as central to voice, teamwork, team learning, and organizational learning, and Frazier et al. (2017) synthesized the empirical literature to show robust associations between psychological

safety and important workplace outcomes. The implication is well established. People are more likely to ask, challenge, admit, revise, and propose when they believe that speaking will not trigger humiliation or retaliation. For innovation, that is foundational because unfinished thought must be surfaced before it can be strengthened (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017).

Yet the same literature also clarifies why psychological safety may be necessary without being sufficient. Morrison (2011) and Detert and Edmondson (2011) showed that voice behavior is shaped not only by objective climate but also by taken for granted beliefs about when speaking up is wise, safe, or legitimate. A team may therefore be safe enough for occasional speech while still remaining too fragile, too politically extractive, or too status sensitive to support the full arc of innovation. Put differently, psychological safety can lower the expected cost of speaking without guaranteeing that the speaker's growth will remain desired once it changes the local prestige economy. That is the central gap this paper addresses. It is not a rejection of psychological safety. It is an attempt to theorize what lies beyond it in settings where creativity changes the symbolic distribution of authority (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison, 2011; Newman et al., 2017).

The belonging and identification literature provides the conceptual ingredients for that extension. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that belonging requires recurring positive interaction and the belief that the relationship is stable and marked by mutual concern. Ashforth and Mael (1989) showed how identification links the self to a collective through perceived oneness and meaningful membership, while Kahn (1990) argued that psychological safety helps people employ and express themselves more fully in role. Taken together, these literatures suggest that people do not only need permission to speak. They need confidence that fuller participation will not dissolve the relationship that makes participation possible. This is a stronger condition than safety alone because it concerns continuity, mutuality, and the durability of developmental regard (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kahn, 1990).

The creativity and innovation literature further reinforces the need for a more relational theory. Zhou and Hoever (2014) argue that creativity research must move beyond separate actor centered and context centered explanations toward an interactionist view, while Anderson et al. (2014) distinguish idea generation from idea implementation and show that both are integral parts of the same broader process. Van Knippenberg (2017) similarly argues that team innovation depends on both informational resources and the extent to which teams actually integrate them. These reviews imply that the crucial obstacle is often not idea generation itself. It is the movement from idea, to recognition, to sponsorship, to implementation. The social fate of originality depends on how environments interpret novelty, especially when it emerges from actors below the symbolic center of authority (Zhou & Hoever, 2014; Anderson et al., 2014; van Knippenberg, 2017).

Theoretical Development

This paper proposes reflective power as a missing concept in the study of innovation under dependence. Reflective power is the capacity of a higher power actor to shape action, aspiration, and norm formation not chiefly through fear, exchange, or charisma, but through the publicly visible alignment between stated values, resource decisions, credit allocation, developmental sponsorship, and responses to others' growth. It is reflective in two senses. It requires self reflection from the leader, who must ask what their conduct teaches about power, and it operates through social reflection, because subordinates and bystanders infer what leadership means by watching how asymmetry is used. Reflective power is therefore not the denial of hierarchy. It is the disciplined use of hierarchy in a manner that remains developmentally intelligible to those who depend on it (Bandura, 2001; Tyler, 2006).

Building on resource dependence theory, the paper introduces a distinction between constrained resources and withheld resources. Resources are constrained when scarcity is real, criteria are legible, trade offs are discussable, and similar decision logic applies broadly across actors. Resources are withheld when capacity exists but access is selectively delayed, obscured, personalized, or tied to deference. This distinction is not canonically named in the core literature, but it is consistent with resource dependence theory's basic concern with asymmetry, autonomy, and legitimacy. Hillman et al. (2009) and Drees and Heugens (2013) show that organizations respond to dependence by structuring environment relations to reduce vulnerability and increase autonomy. The added move here is to recognize that some power holders preserve advantage by making it difficult for others to tell

whether denial reflects genuine scarcity or intentional withholding. That ambiguity is central to innovative failure because it turns technical uncertainty into social uncertainty (Hillman et al., 2009; Drees & Heugens, 2013).

The difference between constrained and withheld resources shapes action very differently. In genuinely constrained settings, innovators usually ask how to recombine what is actually available. In withheld environments, they must ask what is truly impossible and what has merely been declared inaccessible. That second question is more corrosive because it undermines interpretive stability. Real scarcity can stimulate ingenuity if the boundaries are intelligible. Arbitrary opacity tends instead to produce defensiveness, self censorship, and political fatigue. Bandura's (2001) framework helps explain why. Innovation under hierarchy often requires direct agency, proxy agency, and collective agency. When resource holders convert proxy dependence into a loyalty test rather than a developmental duty, they obstruct not only access but agency itself. Reflective power responds by making the logic of limits more transparent so that dependence becomes navigable rather than mystifying (Bandura, 2001; Tyler, 2006).

Psychological safety enters at this point as an indispensable but incomplete condition. It is indispensable because innovation involves dissent, questions, mistakes, and unfinished claims, all of which require freedom from humiliation or punishment (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). It is incomplete because a person may believe that speaking is allowed while still doubting that their resulting growth will remain relationally welcomed. The literature strongly supports the first half of that statement and indirectly suggests the second through work on voice, self censorship, and role based self expression (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Kahn, 1990; Morrison, 2011). The present paper therefore argues that psychological safety is a threshold condition for creative participation, whereas psychological bonding is a stronger developmental condition for creative persistence and succession.

Psychological bonding is proposed here as a higher order relational condition in which members of a setting believe not only that interpersonal risk is tolerable, but that their fuller development will be met with continuing mutual concern, nondefensive recognition, and stable investment. The construct draws from three literatures without collapsing into any one of them. From psychological safety it retains reduced fear of interpersonal punishment. From belongingness it retains the need for recurrent positive interaction and confidence in the durability of mutual concern. From identification and engagement it retains the idea that people invest the self more fully when the setting feels worthy of that investment rather than merely survivable (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kahn, 1990). Psychological bonding therefore extends safety by asking whether the transformed self that emerges from creative risk will still belong.

Reflective power fosters psychological bonding through five mechanisms. First, it creates legibility. Resource rationales, developmental criteria, and pathways to testing are made intelligible enough that actors can distinguish constraint from withholding. Second, it produces nondefensive recognition. The higher power actor refuses to treat another's growth as symbolic theft. Third, it secures credit integrity. Authorship and contribution remain traceable rather than being absorbed upward. Fourth, it models developmental sponsorship. The superior uses proxy agency to widen, rather than permanently monopolize, pathways for others. Fifth, it shapes bystander learning. Others in the environment infer that power here is strong enough to coexist with subordinate excellence. These mechanisms synthesize the implications of work on legitimacy, agency, voice, and innovation climates even though the resulting construct is proposed by this paper rather than directly measured in prior research (Bandura, 2001; Tyler, 2006; Zhou & Hoever, 2014; van Knippenberg, 2017).

These mechanisms also clarify why reflective power matters especially in innovative settings. Creativity breaks expected form. It distorts the familiar mirror of the group. When subordinates create beyond the script, people above them can experience that development as evidence of good stewardship or as a threat to symbolic centrality. The difference lies less in the novelty itself than in the leader's interpretation of its relation to power. Reflective power asks the leader to renounce the temptation to solve that tension by making the innovator smaller. In that sense, reflective power is not simply a humane leadership style. It is a more sustainable theory of power for creative contexts because it preserves legitimacy while enabling deviation from the norm, which innovation requires by definition (Anderson et al., 2014; Grant & Berry, 2011; Berg, 2016).

Illustrative Cases

The first case concerns an urban construction project in a major city. A founder is developing a mixed use building that depends on an innovative low carbon fabrication method not yet standardized among local suppliers. The city is formally resource rich. Skilled manufacturers exist, technical knowledge exists, and public officials publicly celebrate innovation. Yet access to preferred production windows, engineering attention, favorable payment terms, and implementation credibility flows through a tight network of incumbent manufacturers and contractors. Some constraints are real. Approval schedules are finite and cost pressure is genuine. But other limits are strategic. Prototype slots are quietly reserved for known firms, technical objections are raised selectively against the newcomer, and the founder is told to prove reliability in ways incumbents never are. This is a mixed setting in which genuine constraint and withheld resources coexist.

Reflective power in this case would have to be exercised by those with the greatest coordinating authority, namely the public project executive, the prime contractor, and the most central manufacturing partner. Their task would not be to eliminate standards or grant indulgence. Their task would be to make the developmental logic of access visible. They would publish milestone criteria, create transparent pilot windows, separate legitimate technical concerns from status based resistance, and credit technical contributions publicly rather than absorbing them into incumbent prestige. Psychological safety would be present when suppliers and engineers believed they could surface problems without embarrassment. Psychological bonding would emerge when the founder and network actors also believed that the innovation's success would not be narrated as a humiliation of legacy expertise, but as a shared enlargement of the city's capability base. In this case, reflective power converts asymmetry from a cartel of recognition into a scaffold for collective learning (Hillman et al., 2009; Drees & Heugens, 2013; van Knippenberg, 2017).

The second case concerns an employment governed environment in which a dominant organization controls not only wages and tools, but also movement, training access, time allocations, and reputational mobility. An employee in operations develops a sensor based improvement that could materially improve maintenance reliability, but testing it requires temporary access to another unit's data, a few hours of protected experimentation, and support from a supervisor who fears losing interpretive control. Formally, the company praises initiative. Practically, every developmental move is chain of command dependent. In such a setting, the employee's direct agency is strong, but proxy agency is monopolized by actors above them.

A nonreflective supervisor can preserve local authority by slowing access, framing experimentation as impatience, requiring displays of gratitude that blur development into loyalty, and subtly teaching the wider workforce that innovation is welcome only when it leaves status arrangements undisturbed. Reflective power would change the meaning of supervision. The leader would clarify which limits are truly scarce and which are discretionary, build a transparent internal test corridor for cross unit pilots, protect limited experimentation time, and publicly signal that subordinate capability growth is evidence of good stewardship rather than a threat to status. Psychological safety would explain why the employee can raise the idea. Psychological bonding would explain why the employee continues to invest after the first risky conversation, because the environment has shown that growth will not be converted into relational debt. In this setting, reflective power reduces the grip of manufactured dependence by making movement and sponsorship more principle governed than person dependent (Bandura, 2001; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Tyler, 2006).

The third case focuses on a father mentoring a son in a creative household. The father is accomplished and disciplined, perhaps as a musician, builder, or visual artist, and the son is beginning to produce work in a related but not identical medium. The father wants seriousness, integrity, and craft, but he also feels a latent tension. The son's originality may eventually reflect on him in ways he cannot fully author. This is the intimate form of the paper's core problem. Under a purely directive model, the father can preserve authority by rewarding imitation, correcting deviation quickly, and making approval contingent on forms that flatter his own identity. The son may become competent, but he may also learn that creativity is welcomed only while it remains image enhancing for the elder.

Reflective power changes the paternal standard from do as I say to become the kind of person my conduct teaches you to be. This is not permissiveness. It is more demanding. The father must show in practice what disciplined creativity looks like, how correction can coexist with dignity, how effort continues after mastery, and how one receives another person's growth without symbolic panic. The son's responsibility also changes. He is not asked

simply to imitate or rebel. He is asked to inherit principles without becoming a replica. Psychological safety in this case means that unfinished work can be shown without ridicule. Psychological bonding means that differentiation itself is not treated as betrayal. When that happens, the father's authority is not diminished by the son's development. It is deepened by the evidence that his power was developmental enough to generate an autonomous successor (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kahn, 1990; Bandura, 2001).

Across all three cases, the key contrast is not simply between kind leadership and harsh leadership. It is between defensive power and reflective power. Defensive power uses asymmetry to keep another person's development socially manageable for the superior. Reflective power uses asymmetry to make another person's development structurally and relationally possible. Psychological safety lowers the cost of voice across these contexts. Psychological bonding changes the meaning of growth itself. It tells the innovator that belonging is not conditional on remaining small, and it tells the power holder that the deepest test of authority is whether it can remain meaningful after it has helped others become more capable than they were when they first depended on it (Edmondson, 1999; Tyler, 2006; van Knippenberg, 2017).

DISCUSSION

The theoretical implication of this paper is that creativity under dependence is not adequately explained by talent, climate, or safety alone. Resource dependence theory explains why asymmetry matters, and psychological safety explains why interpersonal risk matters, but the proposed concepts of reflective power and psychological bonding explain why creativity becomes especially fragile at the point where growth changes the social meaning of power. That is the paper's main conceptual contribution. It reframes the problem of innovative suppression as more than inadequate support or excessive fear. It becomes, instead, a question of whether higher power actors can tolerate the reflective consequences of other people's development without solving the tension through containment. In that sense, the paper extends rather than displaces its core theories (Hillman et al., 2009; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Tyler, 2006).

The policy implications follow directly. Organizations that care about innovation should not ask only whether leaders generate results. They should ask whether leaders make resource criteria legible, whether they distribute credit in developmentally credible ways, and whether they respond nondefensively to subordinate excellence. This has implications for procurement systems, internal mobility rules, apprenticeship structures, promotion criteria, and leadership evaluation. The most practical policy shift is from rewarding outcome extraction alone to rewarding developmental stewardship. Such a shift would not eliminate hierarchy. It would discipline hierarchy by tying authority to its visible effects on future capability formation (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Newman et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2014).

The practice implications are equally concrete. Leaders seeking to cultivate reflective power should first clarify whether their environment is constrained or withholding. They should then make developmental criteria explicit, create bounded but real pathways to experimentation, protect authorship, and monitor their own reactions when others grow unexpectedly fast. The key practical discipline is to refuse symbolic defensiveness. When another person's creativity feels like a threat to the reflection of one's own power, the leader's first task is not to contain that person. It is to examine the fragility in the way power is being held. Practicing reflective power therefore means treating asymmetry as a temporary trust, not an enduring entitlement (Bandura, 2001; Tyler, 2006; Grant & Berry, 2011).

Future research should treat psychological bonding as a construct related to but distinct from psychological safety, identification, and engagement. Scholars could examine whether psychological bonding predicts long horizon creative persistence, authorship protection, sponsorship of others, and retention after conflict above and beyond psychological safety measures. Reflective power could be operationalized through consistency between espoused values and observed resource allocation, the visibility of developmental criteria, the distribution of credit after successful innovation, and the superior's response to upwardly surprising performance. Multi level designs would be especially useful because the theory predicts effects at dyadic, team, and institutional levels simultaneously. If tested carefully, these constructs could help explain why some organizations remain verbally supportive of creativity while repeatedly failing to produce sustainable innovators (Frazier et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2014; van Knippenberg, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that innovative growth under dependence turns on more than the presence of ideas or even the presence of safety. It turns on whether those with greater power can use asymmetry in ways that remain legible, nondefensive, and developmentally generative when someone else's creativity begins to reflect on them. By pairing resource dependence theory with psychological safety and extending them through reflective power and psychological bonding, the paper offers a more relational account of why innovation flourishes in some constrained settings and stalls in others. The decisive question is not simply whether power can command outcomes. It is whether power can help produce new creators without needing to diminish them first. When it can, creativity no longer threatens belonging. It deepens it.

Executive Summary

This paper develops reflective power as a new conceptual dimension of psychological bonding in creative and innovative settings marked by hierarchy. Its central claim is that resource dependence theory explains why asymmetries in access, legitimacy, and sponsorship matter, and psychological safety explains why people need freedom from punishment to speak, test, and dissent, but neither framework fully explains a recurring problem in innovation contexts. That problem arises when a lower power actor's growing creativity begins to reflect back on the identity, status, or symbolic authority of the person above them. At that moment, the higher power actor can either respond defensively by narrowing access and reabsorbing credit, or reflectively by making constraints legible, protecting authorship, and using asymmetry to grow rather than contain the innovator. The paper argues that the latter response creates psychological bonding, which is more developmentally durable than psychological safety alone (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Hillman et al., 2009; Drees & Heugens, 2013; Tyler, 2006).

The paper further distinguishes constrained resources from withheld resources. Constrained resources refer to real scarcity that is visible, discussable, and broadly intelligible. Withheld resources refer to an environment in which resources exist but access is selectively delayed, obscured, personalized, or exchanged for deference. That distinction matters because innovation can survive real scarcity more readily than it can survive arbitrary opacity. The theory proposed here argues that reflective power transforms dependence by clarifying the meaning of constraints, lowering symbolic defensiveness, and turning leadership into a visible model of how power should be used. The practical value of this framework is illustrated through three detailed hypothetical cases involving an urban construction project, an employment governed environment, and a father to child creative mentorship. Across all three, psychological bonding emerges when people believe that their growth will remain wanted even when it changes the social meaning of power in the relationship (Bandura, 2001; Zhou & Hoever, 2014; Anderson et al., 2014; van Knippenberg, 2017).

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