

# DEEPENING SOCIAL DOMINANCE AND INTERPERSONAL POWER IN HIERARCHY ENHANCING ORGANIZATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Social Dominance Theory (SDT; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) posits that group hierarchies are maintained through a disproportionate distribution of power in favor of superior rather than subordinate groups. Superior and subordinate groups often agree in preserving inequalities sharing an ideological consensus maintaining a social system based on group hierarchies. This processes become salient within hierarchy-enhancing (HE) working environments (e.i., high-profit based organizations) in which group hierarchies are sustained by legitimizing myths rooted in the culture of this specific affirmed social systems. The Interpersonal Power Interaction model (IPIM; see, Pierro et al., 2004) argues that power strategies could be divided into two main categories: harsh power tactics and soft power tactics. The harsh-soft dimension refers to the difference in the amount of freedom that the target of power (the subordinate) is allowed in choosing whether, or not, to comply with the supervisors' usage of power tactics. Within the framework of SDT the use of harsh power tactics in an organization contributes to maintain the stability of group-based hierarchies, while the endorsing of soft power tactics could weaken group hierarchies and inequalities (Aiello, Pratto, & Pierro, 2013).

## HYPOTHESES

The present research aims to study whether in an HE work environment, high-social dominance orientation (SDO) supervisors – compared to high-SDO subordinates – endorse predominantly the use of harsh interpersonal power tactics (H1-a) and oppose mostly to soft interpersonal power tactics (H2-a) holding much social power for sustaining inequalities. The study also aims to recognize whether group's hierarchies are maintained through an ideological consensus between supervisors and subordinates in using harsh (H1-b) and in opposing to soft (H2-b) power tactics.

## METHOD

**Participants:** Two-hundred and eighty-five employees (152 were women) drawn from an Italian pharmaceutical company (an HE working environment) participated to the study. Their mean age was of 45 (SD = 9.20). Educational level: 41 completed middle school, 108 had a high school diploma and 136 had a Bachelors degree. Eighty participants were in well established supervisory roles, and 205 were in clear subordinates roles.

### Measures

□ **Social Dominance Orientation:** we used the Italian adaptation (Aiello et al., 2005) of the original SDO<sup>6</sup> scale. The scale is a self-report measure composed by 13 items with a response format on a 7-point likert scale.

□ **Power Tactics:** we used the Italian version (Pierro et al., 2004) of the Worker's Format of the Interpersonal Power Inventory. The questionnaire encompasses two forms, one for supervisors and one for subordinates. Each form presents 33 statements (response format: 7-point likert scale) corresponding to 11 power tactics described in IPIM (three item per power tactic). As previous studies confirmed the 11 power bases can be grouped into two underlying dimensions: “harsh” and “soft” power tactics.

**Data Analyses:** in order to examine how the “role” variable (supervisors vs. subordinates, dummy coded) moderates the association between SDO and harsh tactics (H1-a) and the association between SDO and soft tactics (H2-a) we performed two simple moderation model through the use of multiple linear regression. To further deepen the moderation effect and to confirm the hypothesis of ideological consensus between supervisors and subordinates in approving harsh tactics or in opposing to soft tactics (H1-b, and H2-b), we graphically represented the moderation effect among the study's variables. We used the simple slope analysis for verifying the conditional effect of independent variable (SDO) on dependent variable (soft tactics or harsh tactics) at each of the two levels of dichotomous moderator variable (supervisors vs subordinates).

## MAIN RESULTS

**SDO and Harsh tactics:** the interaction between SDO (predictor) and “role” (moderator) was positively associated to harsh tactics ( $B=.35, p<.05$ ), showing that “role” variable moderates the association between SDO and harsh tactics (see Table 1). In Figure 1 is shown the interaction effect among variables where one can observe that high-SDO supervisors (vs. high-SDO subordinates) were higher on harsh tactics confirming H1-a. Simple slope analysis shows that the slopes for supervisors ( $B=.68, p<.001$ ) and subordinates ( $B=.34, p<.01$ ) were statistically significant confirming H1-b: a coordination between supervisors and subordinates in endorsing harsh tactics, expressed by a positive association between SDO and harsh tactics for both the roles.

**SDO and Soft tactics:** we found that SDO x role was negatively related to soft tactics ( $-.56, p<.001$ ) confirming that “role” variable moderates the association between SDO and soft tactics. Figure 2 shows that high-SDO supervisors (vs. high-SDO subordinates) were lower on soft tactics confirming H2-a. Simple slope analysis does not confirm H2-b showing that the association between SDO and soft tactics was statistically significant ( $B=-.42, p<.001$ ), while the same association was not significant for subordinates ( $B=.14, p>.05$ ). Thus we do not observe a coordination between supervisors and subordinates in opposing to soft power tactics.

Figure 1. Interaction between SDO (predictor) and role (moderator) on harsh power tactics (dependent variable)

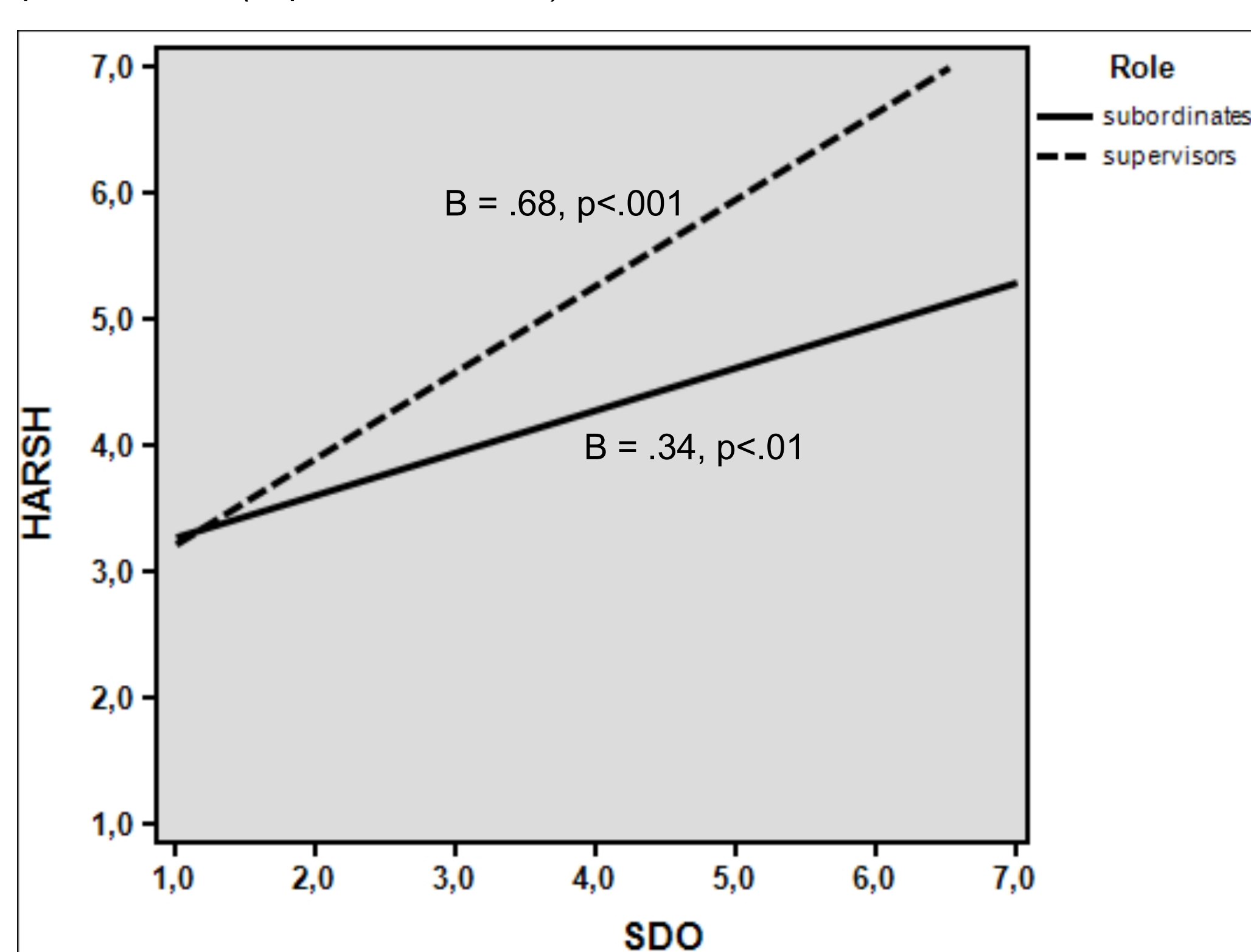
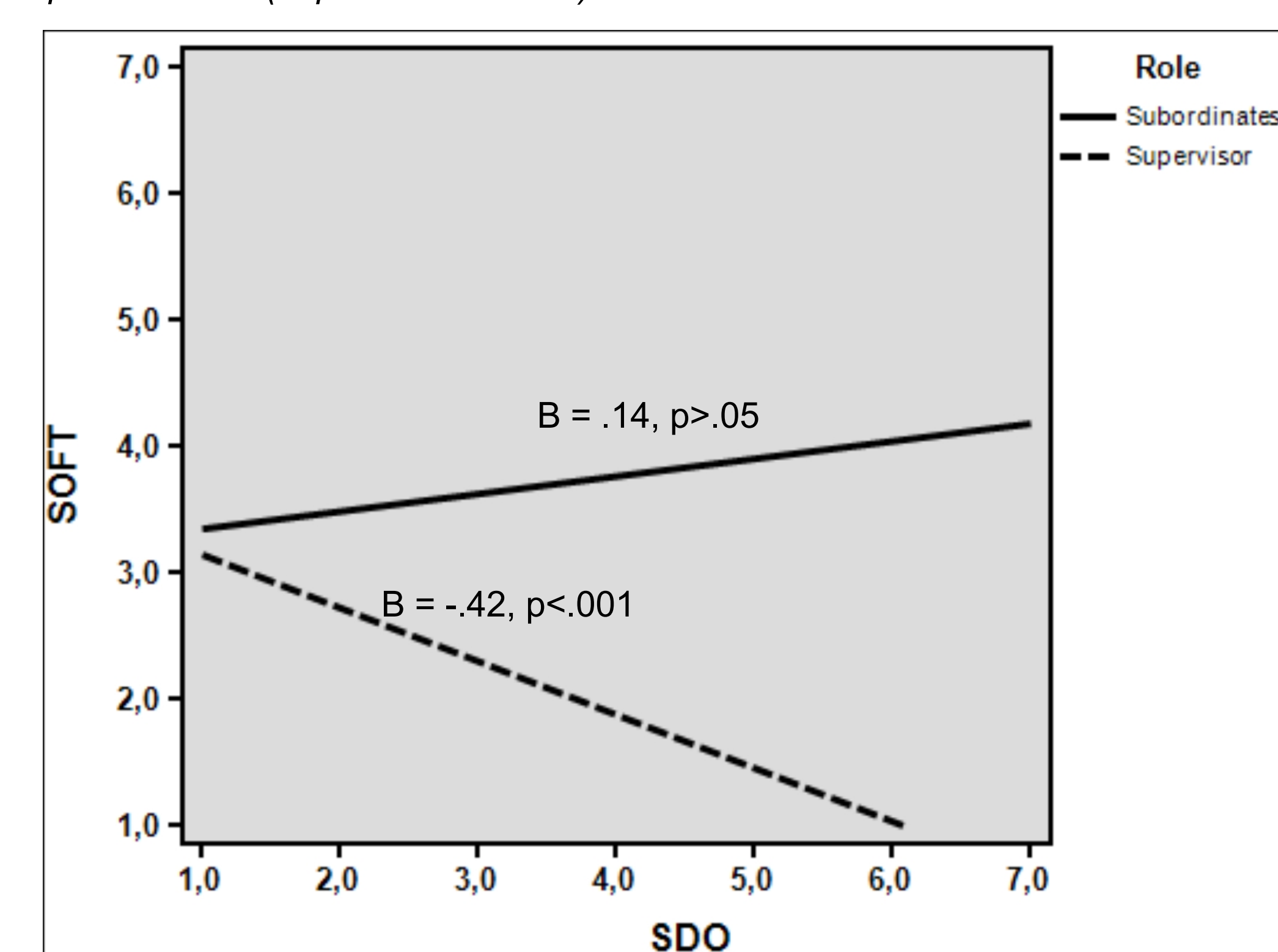


Table 1. Results of hierarchical moderated regression for harsh and soft power tactics

	Harsh tactics				Soft tactics			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
<b>Predictors</b>	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Age	.02**	.01	.02*	.01*	-.01*	-.01*	-.02*	-.01
Gender	.02	.06	.05	.02	-.11	-.12	-.11	-.05
Educational level	.01	-.11	-.07	-.11	.04	.06	-.03	.10
Harsh tactics	-	-	-	-	.48**	.51**	.51**	.52**
Soft tactics	.56**	.51**	.51**	.53**	-	-	-	-
SDO		.43**	.51**	.34*		-.07	-.14	.14
Role			-.34*	-.40*			-.26	.35*
SDO x Role				.35*				-.56**
R <sup>2</sup>	.29**	.39**	.40**	.41**	.28**	.28**	.29**	.32**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		.10**	.01*	.01*		.00	.01	.03**

Notes: \*\* p<.001 \*p<.05; Role coding (subordinates=0, supervisors=1)

Figure 2. Interaction between SDO (predictor) and role (moderator) on soft power tactics (dependent variable)



## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The interaction analyses showed that high-SDO supervisors (vs. high-SDO subordinates) were higher in endorsing harsh power tactics and in opposing to soft power tactics. This result is in line with the SDT, which posits that supervisors hold much power within HE environments sustaining hierarchies and inequalities through the use of more harsh coercive power tactics, and avoiding soft power tactics. We also observed a coordination between supervisors and subordinates in endorsing harsh power tactics for maintaining inequalities in order to guarantee ideological stability into a specific social system (Aiello, Pratto, & Pierro, 2013). Moreover, we did not found the expected agreement between supervisors and subordinates in opposing to soft tactics. Discussing this result we could posit that subordinates (in our sample) could not effectively comply in avoid soft power tactics that, as expected, were not explicitly allowed and spread by their supervisors. Indeed, subordinates can not oppose to soft power tactics because these tactics are not favored and thus not used by supervisors within the HE organization in which they work. On the whole, in the present study we confirmed SDT as a powerful theoretical framework for understanding the interplay of asymmetrical relationships (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and interpersonal power shared among dominant and dominated groups in HE organizations. Future studies will be necessary in order to deepen the interweaving between SDO and interpersonal power; for example studying that relationships in different environments (e.g., hierarchy-attenuating) or in relation to specific organizational outcomes (e.g., organizational commitment, work-related stress and different degree of organizational well-being).

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