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Power Posing Is Back: Amy Cuddy Successfully Refutes Criticism

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Careers

I cover the intersection of business, psychology and gender.

Amy Cuddy demonstrates an expansive body posture. (Photo: Getty Images, Craig Barritt)

In 2012, power posing was all the rage. Job candidates, public speakers and athletes were finding a few minutes alone to adopt Wonder Woman-like expansive body postures, hoping to boost their feelings of power. Amy Cuddy's TED talk on the benefits of power posing garnered over 46 million views and became the second-most-popular TED talk in history. Then everything changed when Cuddy's research was attacked by her fellow social psychologists. The media piled on with [headlines](#) suggesting that power poses don't work, and the research on power posing was labeled pseudoscience. Now, Cuddy and her new collaborators published a [rebuttal](#) to the naysayers suggesting power posing is still a legit method to make yourself fee

more powerful. Who is correct? After reviewing the research, I'd recommend you get your power pose ready to go.

What is Power Posing?

In case you missed the power pose craze, Cuddy's message was simple. She suggests that our body language governs how we think and feel about ourselves, and thus, how we hold our bodies can have an impact on our minds. In other words, by commanding a powerful stance, we can make ourselves actually feel more powerful.

The evidence of power posing came from a [study](#) that Cuddy completed while at Harvard University, where participants sat in either a high-power pose (expansive posture) or low-power pose (leaning inward, legs crossed) for two minutes. Cuddy found that those who sat in the high-power pose, felt more powerful and performed better in mock interviews than those who had not.

It's important to understand that Cuddy's research had two major findings. The first was that people who sat in high-power positions felt more powerful than their low-power pose counterparts. The second was that the power posing actually changed their body chemistry. Cuddy's study suggested that those who adopted high-power poses demonstrated an increase in testosterone and a decrease in cortisol. Cuddy interpreted these hormonal effects as further evidence of increases in feelings of power.

After Cuddy's TED talk was released, it seemed everyone was power posing. Before interviews, job candidates would escape to the rest room to engage in two minutes of high power posing before meeting their interviewer. Even my son's Little League team would regroup in the dugout for two minutes in a high-power pose prior to the first inning.

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The Argument Against Power Posing

When a [study](#) designed to replicate Cuddy's findings on power posing failed to duplicate Cuddy's results, the questions started. Although academics often find their work criticized, the critique against power posing seemed more aggressive than typical academic inquiry. So harsh was the criticism that a [New York Times](#) reporter who covered the controversy described that those familiar with Cuddy's research we

afraid to defend her work, “Two tenured psychology professors at Ivy League universities acknowledged to me that they would have publicly defended some of Cuddy’s positions were they not worried about making themselves targets.” Even Cuddy’s coauthor on the power posing study distanced herself from the research, an in an oddly worded retraction, said the power posing effects were “not real.”

What was the controversy all about? It mostly has to do with a statistical technique referred to as the p-curve. An oversimplified explanation of this technique is that if majority of studies in a particular area just barely meet the criteria for statistical significance, then the research may not be legit. It’s a sign that the researchers may have manipulated their data (for example, choosing to exclude certain data points to obtain significant results) or the researchers may have just gotten lucky. According to her detractors, Cuddy’s and other researchers’ work on power posing didn’t pass the p-curve test. As a result, her research was relegated to pseudoscience.

Science Or Pseudoscience – Who is Correct?

Now, Cuddy can legitimately claim that power posing is science. Cuddy’s new [academic paper](#) published in March in *Psychological Science*, offers ample evidence (that even passes the p-curve test) that adopting an expansive posture makes people feel more powerful. Cuddy now refers to the effect as postural feedback rather than power posing (perhaps to appease to those who claimed her research was more pop than science). Cuddy’s analysis examined over 55 studies and clearly demonstrates a link between expansive postures and feelings of power. Even the replication study that set off the original controversy found that those in high power poses felt more powerful than their low pose counterparts.

However, recall that the original claim about power posing was that it led to two effects: increasing feelings of power and altering hormones. The effects of power posing on hormones is still questionable. There is insufficient replication of the hormone aspect of Cuddy’s results to say that power posing has any real effect on our hormones.

Nonetheless, feeling more powerful after power posing is a major finding. I certainly find myself in many situations when I’d like to feel more powerful. If adopting an expansive posture can help, I’m all in.

Why The Harsh Attacks On Cuddy And Power Posing?

Nobody can say for sure why the attacks of Cuddy's work were particularly harsh, but I have two theories. The first is because she was a successful female. One of her detractors refers to her as "the star" in his blog, clearly focusing in on her success. There is a substantial body of research that suggests that ambitious, successful women are not liked (think Hillary Clinton). And not only was Cuddy successful and powerful herself, but the goal of her research was to empower other women and minorities. If people generally don't like powerful women, we can only imagine what they think of powerful women trying to help other women become powerful.

The second cause of the harsh criticism is that academics don't like research that people outside of the ivory towers can understand and apply in their everyday lives. And media attention on an academic's research is OK, but only if the academics don't seek it out themselves. I know that may sound absurd, but I saw repeated evidence of such bias in my many years as a graduate student. Cuddy translated her research so it was simple and understandable to the masses. The media loved it, and the general public loved it, but her detractors saw this as yet another flaw. One of her primary critics referred to her research as "gee-whiz science", suggesting that any research that is interesting to the general public must be flawed.

Get Your Power Pose On.

The good news is that Cuddy has successfully redeemed power posing. Under the pressure of the harsh criticism, it would have been easy for her to run away from this line of research altogether. But science requires us to take criticism and push forward to get to the truth. Clearly, there are still many unanswered questions in this area and much more research is needed. But Cuddy's persistence will hopefully inspire others to pursue more study in this area. In the meantime, if you have two minutes before your next big meeting or interview, you should consider adopting a power pose.

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