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The Gendered Returns to Power: How Gender, Structural Power, and Perceived Resource Sufficiency Shape Meritocracy Perceptions in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Why do women remain underrepresented in positions of power? The present work leverages four studies ($N = 99,293$) spanning archival, qualitative, and experimental methods to surface one novel antecedent to this gender gap. Men (vs. women) tend to perceive their organizations as more meritocratic as a function of their structural power (Studies 1–2). This gender difference is statistically accounted for by the fact that men's power is more often accompanied by *perceived resource sufficiency*, or the appraisal that one has adequate instrumental and material resources to meet role demands and exercise authority effectively (Studies 1–3). A preregistered experiment finds that higher (vs. lower) perceived resource sufficiency increases meritocracy perceptions, which in turn increase career investment intentions but weaken support for equity-enhancing initiatives (Study 4). Together, these findings reveal that structural power's psychological consequences are not uniform across gender but depend on whether authority is accompanied by the resources needed to exercise power. The gender gap in power may thus reproduce itself, as women become less convinced that the system rewards their effort, whereas men with the authority to change organizational systems become least likely to see the need for change.

1 | Introduction

Meritocracy perceptions, or beliefs that rewards such as compensation, promotions, and recognition are allocated on the basis of individual talent and effort, are a cornerstone of American organizational life (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Scully 1997). Organizations typically strive to portray themselves as meritocracies by emphasizing performance-based reward systems and objective evaluation criteria (Dobbin 2009; Heneman and Werner 2005). When employees perceive their organizations as meritocratic, they are more motivated to invest in their careers because they believe their effort will be rewarded (Colquitt et al. 2001; Vroom 1964). However, meritocracy perceptions can also reinforce assumptions of fairness that make structural inequities harder to detect (Castilla and Benard 2010; To et al. 2024).

Meritocracy perceptions therefore shape both how employees navigate their careers and whether they recognize organizational inequities as problems requiring intervention.

Meritocracy perceptions carry particular weight when held among structural powerholders, or individuals who possess formal control over valued resources and organizational processes ("powerholders"; Tost 2015; Tost and Johnson 2019). Because powerholders have outsized influence over whether reward systems are maintained or changed, their beliefs influence whether organizational inequities are defended or questioned (Finkelstein 1992; Magee and Galinsky 2008; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). For instance, when powerholders believe their organization already exhibits gender and racial equity, they are less likely to support equity-enhancing initiatives (To

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et al. 2024). Yet structural power itself predicts viewing one's organization as more equitable, a perception that can serve as a proxy for broader meritocratic beliefs (To et al. 2024). We refer to this positive relationship between structural power and meritocracy perceptions as the *power–meritocracy link*.

Notably, the power to shape organizational systems is unevenly distributed by gender. Men occupy a majority of high-power roles (Field et al. 2023), raising the question of whether the power–meritocracy link is moderated by gender. If so, then existing inequities may become entrenched because the actors most likely to hold authority (i.e., high-power men) may also be those least likely to support corrective change. At the same time, if women in power doubt that their efforts will be fairly rewarded, their motivation to pursue further career advancement may weaken (Colquitt et al. 2001; Vroom 1964). Meritocracy perceptions may therefore produce a dual effect: leading those best positioned to enact structural change—namely powerful men—to see no need for it, while simultaneously discouraging women from seeking advancement. Together, these dynamics would reinforce the well-documented gender gap in leadership (Bertrand and Hallock 2001; Lyness and Grotto 2018). Therefore, we ask: *Does the association between structural power and meritocracy perceptions differ for men and women and, if so, how do these perceptions affect support for equity-enhancing initiatives and motivation for career advancement?*

Two theoretical perspectives offer contrasting predictions. On one hand, the social psychological literature finds that experimentally induced power elicits comparable responses in men and women (Anderson and Galinsky 2006; Fast et al. 2012; Kifer et al. 2013), suggesting that the documented positive relationship between power and meritocracy-relevant beliefs (To et al. 2024) may not differ across gender. Recent empirical work synthesizing experimental and meta-analytic findings suggests that unequal access to power may contribute to observed gender differences (Galinsky et al. 2024). If power access partly drives these differences, then men and women in similarly powerful roles might be expected to hold more similar meritocracy perceptions. Notably, however, existing empirical work has only examined main effects of power on meritocracy-relevant beliefs (To et al. 2024), leaving the possibility of gendered divergence untheorized and untested.

On the other hand, research on gender and organizations documents that even when women attain powerful roles, they often have less access to organizational support, have greater role demands, and face heightened scrutiny (Bailyn 2003; Eagly and Karau 2002; Ibarra et al. 2013; Ridgeway 2011; Vial and Cowgill 2022; Wadman 2023). Yet this literature has focused primarily on documenting the unequal conditions women face in power, not on whether or how those conditions translate into systematic differences in how men and women appraise the organizations that grant them authority. Together, these perspectives leave unresolved whether structural power is associated with similar meritocracy perceptions for men and women, or whether this relationship depends on the gendered conditions under which power is held.

We propose that structural power is more strongly associated with meritocracy perceptions for men than for women because

gender moderates a key mechanism linking formal authority to meritocratic beliefs: *perceived resource sufficiency*. Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources model (JD–R; Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Demerouti et al. 2001), we define perceived resource sufficiency (PRS) as the subjective appraisal that one has adequate instrumental resources (e.g., mentorship, sponsorship, information) and material resources (e.g., staffing, budgets, institutional backing) to meet role demands and exercise authority effectively. Although structural power is often assumed to provide access to valued resources (Magee and Galinsky 2008; Pfeffer 1987; Tost 2015), we argue that the returns to power differ by gender (e.g., Bailyn 2003; Ibarra et al. 2013; Lee and Kray 2021). Because PRS reflects whether formal authority is experienced as adequately resourced, structural power should be more strongly associated with PRS for men than for women. PRS should, in turn, strengthen meritocracy perceptions by making success appear attainable through effort and ability, with consequences for powerholders' career investment and support for equity-enhancing change.

We test these predictions across four studies. Studies 1 and 2 leverage large-scale archival datasets of US federal employees to test whether structural power is more positively associated with PRS and meritocracy perceptions for men than for women, and whether PRS statistically accounts for the gender gap in the power–meritocracy link. These data allow us to study structural power in real organizational settings, rather than in laboratory contexts that temporarily induce power or strip it of its structural conditions. Study 3 uses a qualitative lay-theory design to examine whether managers invoke PRS as a plausible explanation for the gender gap in the power–meritocracy link. Finally, Study 4 experimentally manipulates PRS among powerholders to test its effects on meritocracy perceptions and two downstream consequences: career intentions and support for an equity-enhancing initiative.

Our findings make three primary contributions. First, we develop a resource-contingent theory of how meritocracy perceptions are formed. Prior work has studied meritocracy perceptions primarily as system-justifying beliefs that make unequal outcomes appear deserved (Castilla and Benard 2010; Jost and Hunyady 2005; McCoy and Major 2007), emphasizing that a key antecedent is whether one has already had successful outcomes within the system being evaluated (Castilla and Ranganathan 2020; Fehr and Vollmann 2025; Mijs et al. 2022). However, this outcome-based account overlooks a critical upstream step. Before effort can be rewarded, it must first be converted into observable performance. Drawing on the organizational performance literature, which argues that performance depends not only on one's capacity and willingness but also on one's opportunity to perform (e.g., Blumberg and Pringle 1982), we propose that PRS captures whether employees believe the organization enables this conversion. By surfacing PRS as a structural antecedent of meritocracy perceptions, our framework explains how meritocracy beliefs can diverge even among employees in nominally similar positions with nominally similar outcomes, a divergence the outcome-based account cannot predict.

Second, our work challenges a foundational assumption in the power literature, namely that power's psychological consequences are gender-symmetric. Social psychological research

has accumulated extensive evidence highlighting how experimentally induced power produces similar responses for men and women (Anderson and Galinsky 2006; Fast et al. 2012; Kifer et al. 2013), with recent work suggesting that unequal access to power may itself produce many observed gender differences in psychological functioning (Galinsky et al. 2024). Yet this evidence rests on laboratory designs that strip power of the structural conditions under which it is typically held. The parallel literature on gender and organizations documents that men and women exercise authority under sharply unequal conditions (Bailyn 2003; Ibarra et al. 2013; Lee and Kray 2021) but has rarely connected these asymmetries to power's psychological consequences. By examining structural power as it exists in organizations, we show that the gender-symmetric effects of power observed in the lab do not always extend to organizations. Instead, meritocracy perceptions, a system-justifying outcome of power identified in laboratory work, are more likely to emerge for powerful men than for powerful women. This identifies a mechanism by which inequality persists not only because access to power is unequal, but because power itself is experienced differently by those who attain it.

Third, our work recasts the Job Demands–Resources model from a framework primarily used to explain employee functioning to one that also helps explain the hierarchy-legitimizing beliefs and behaviors that sustain organizational inequality. JD–R has been highly generative for understanding how demands and resources shape employee engagement, burn-out, and well-being (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Demerouti et al. 2001). More recent work has also applied the framework to work attitudes, including organizational justice perceptions (Ho 2025; Proost et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2014). However, these applications have primarily used organizational justice perceptions to explain outcomes proximal to employees' own work experiences, such as turnover intentions, organizational identification, and job performance, rather than the hierarchy-legitimizing beliefs and behaviors that sustain organizational inequality (McCoy and Major 2007; Son Hing et al. 2011). In contrast, we show that perceived resource sufficiency, a resource appraisal grounded in JD–R, also shapes meritocracy perceptions, a hierarchy-legitimizing belief that, in turn, reduces support for equity-enhancing initiatives.

2 | Literature Review and Theoretical Development

2.1 | Structural Power Through a Job Demands–Resources Lens

Hierarchy scholarship commonly theorizes structural power as the ability to control valued resources through formal organizational channels (Pfeffer 1987; Tost 2015; Tost and Johnson 2019). In organizations, structurally powerful positions are typically marked by higher rank, greater authority, and greater relative compensation, all of which signal access to decision rights, influence over others, and control over strategic resources (Finkelstein 1992). Because power is grounded in resource control, individuals who occupy more powerful positions should, in principle, have greater access to the resources needed to perform

their roles effectively (Magee and Galinsky 2008; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).¹

The Job Demands–Resources framework offers a different perspective (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Demerouti et al. 2001), clarifying that resources are meaningful relative to the demands they help employees manage. When resources and demands grow proportionally, employees can sustain motivation and meet the goals associated with their roles. However, when demands outpace resources, previously sufficient resources may become inadequate. Applied to power, this framing implies that powerful roles should bring more resources because those resources are required to meet heavier role demands, including a broader scope of authority, more complex decisions, and greater accountability for organizational outcomes (Hambrick et al. 2005; Magee and Galinsky 2008). Thus, powerful roles can be effectively performed only when demands and resources scale together. Yet when demands grow faster than resources, the same formal title should confer a less usable form of power.

2.2 | The Gendered Conditions of Structural Power

A growing body of research on gender and organizations suggests that this latter scenario often characterizes women's experiences in powerful roles. Compared with men in equivalent positions, women in authority often face heavier demands without equivalent resources. In particular, they are expected to perform more emotional labor (Heilman and Chen 2005; Schaubroeck and Jones 2000; Vial and Cowgill 2022) and are more frequently burdened with “non-promotable” tasks such as mentoring, event planning, and committee work (Babcock et al. 2017; Chan and Anteby 2016; Heilman 2012). These expectations intensify as women become scarcer at senior levels (Field et al. 2023; Kanter 1977). They are also more likely to be assigned to leadership roles during organizational crises, adding complexity and volatility to their positions (Ryan and Haslam 2005). Because high-power women face heightened scrutiny (Eagly et al. 1992), they must also spend more time managing how they are perceived by subordinates (Cardador et al. 2022; Feldberg 2022). Even when women hold the same titles and rank as men, the demands attached to those positions tend to be greater.

At the same time, powerful women tend to receive fewer resources to meet these demands. Their personnel support increases more slowly than men's as they gain power (Lee and Kray 2021), and they encounter more resistance from subordinates (Akinola et al. 2018; Cardador et al. 2022; Rudman et al. 2012; Vial et al. 2016). Male employees are more likely to leave organizations when a woman assumes a top leadership role (Kwon and Meyersson Milgrom 2010), and subordinates contribute fewer hours to women-led projects, viewing women's requests for extra effort as less fair (Kacperczyk et al. 2023). Beyond interpersonal pushback, women leaders are also allocated fewer material resources than men in comparable roles (Bailyn 2003; Madden 2012; Wadman 2023). Together, this evidence points to a structural mismatch: as women gain power, their resources may not keep pace with the rising demands of their role. Further, although this literature suggests that high-power women develop an awareness of particular gendered

organizational constraints (DiBenigno 2026; Feldberg 2022; Ibarra et al. 2013; Reid 2015; Turco 2010), less is known about whether women integrate these experiences into a broader appraisal of how well their organization supports their authority, and whether this produces a gender difference that widens with power.

We theorize *perceived resource sufficiency* (herein, PRS) as the proximal appraisal through which these gendered conditions of power become psychologically meaningful. Specifically, PRS captures employees' subjective assessment of whether they have sufficient access to strategically valuable organizational resources needed to meet role demands, accomplish promotable tasks, and exercise authority effectively. These resources include instrumental supports, such as mentorship, sponsorship, information, and access to influential networks, as well as material supports, such as staffing, budgets, and institutional backing. Importantly, although gender bias is often the default explanation for gendered experiences of structural power, PRS offers a more agnostic and potentially more tractable account. Rather than presupposing discriminatory intent or process, it captures the subjective experience of resource inadequacy, helping explain why formal authority may translate into different organizational experiences for men and women. As such, given the evidence reviewed above, we expect that men's PRS will increase as a function of their structural power, whereas this relationship will be attenuated for women.²

Hypothesis 1. *Structural power will be more positively associated with perceived resource sufficiency for men than for women.*

2.3 | Perceived Resource Sufficiency and the Gendered Power–Meritocracy link

In the present work, we propose that PRS shapes the extent to which employees perceive their organization to be meritocratic. Meritocracy perceptions fundamentally concern whether organizational rewards are believed to reflect individual inputs such as talent and effort (Kluegel and Smith 1986). However, this perspective tends to overlook a critical intermediate step: that inputs must first be converted into observable performance before they can be evaluated and rewarded. Research on organizational performance has theorized this intermediate conversion, arguing that performance depends not only on one's capacity and willingness to perform but also on one's *opportunity* to perform (Blumberg and Pringle 1982; Peters and O'Connor 1980). Such opportunities include access to the working conditions, tools, materials, information, support, mentorship, and personnel needed to translate effort and ability into outcomes. Related work on organizational constraints similarly shows that insufficient resources can interfere with the conversion of effort and ability into performance (Spector and Jex 1998; Pindek and Spector 2016). Thus, although organizational performance research has acknowledged that performance is resource-contingent, meritocracy research has not fully integrated this insight into explanations of how employees judge whether organizational rewards truly reflect merit.

We integrate and extend this insight in a novel direction by proposing that employees' subjective appraisals of these enabling

conditions also shape their broader perceptions of whether their organization is meritocratic. Specifically, when employees perceive that they have sufficient resources, performance outcomes should appear more attributable to effort and ability than to unequal enabling conditions, making performance-based rewards seem more legitimate and merit-based. By contrast, when resources are perceived as insufficient, effort and output become less tightly coupled: the same effort may yield weaker results, or the same results may require greater effort. Under these conditions, rewards based on observed performance may appear to reflect unequal opportunity rather than merit. Thus, PRS captures whether employees believe the organization provides the conditions necessary for merit to be fairly demonstrated, evaluated, and rewarded; accordingly, we expect PRS to be positively associated with meritocracy perceptions.

Hypothesis 2. *Perceived resource sufficiency will be positively associated with meritocracy perceptions.*

Collectively, these arguments suggest a gendered pathway from structural power to meritocracy perceptions. Specifically, if structural power is associated with greater PRS for men than for women, and if PRS is positively associated with meritocracy perceptions, then structural power should also be more positively associated with meritocracy perceptions for men.

A plausible alternative, however, is that structural power is associated with more favorable organizational perceptions for men and women alike. Social psychological research finds that power elicits similar psychological experiences for both men and women, including greater agency, confidence, optimism, and perceived control (Anderson and Galinsky 2006; Fast et al. 2012; Kifer et al. 2013). Power also leads individuals to identify more strongly with their power-granting institutions (i.e., organizational identification; Ashforth and Mael 1989; Kennedy and Anderson 2017; To et al. 2024; Tyler and Blader 2003), which in turn motivates them to maintain and defend positive beliefs about their organizations (Dutton et al. 1994; Ellemers et al. 2002). System justification theory likewise suggests that individuals are motivated to legitimize systems from which they benefit, implying that powerful employees, regardless of gender, may be especially likely to view their organizations as fair and meritocratic (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost and Hunyady 2005). From this perspective, structural power could be associated with similarly strong meritocracy perceptions for men and women.

However, the convergence prediction does not fully account for how structural power is shaped by the organizational conditions under which it is typically held. The experimental evidence supporting gender-symmetric effects of power isolates the psychological state of feeling powerful from the structural conditions under which power is often exercised in organizations. Accounts grounded in organizational identification and system justification, in turn, predict that powerholders identify with and legitimize the systems that benefit them but are silent on whether the resource conditions accompanying power are themselves gendered.

We propose that the system-legitimizing effects of power are most likely to emerge when formal authority is accompanied by the resources that allow powerholders to experience their

authority as legitimate and usable in practice (Vial et al. 2016). Because men's higher-power roles are more likely to be accompanied by these resources, we expect structural power to more readily provide men with experiential evidence that effort and ability can be converted into visible performance and rewarded accordingly. For women, by contrast, we expect that higher-power roles may expose the limits of formal authority by revealing that rank does not guarantee the resources needed to perform effectively, suggesting that performance and rewards depend on gendered access to enabling conditions rather than individual merit. PRS therefore explains how gendered resource returns to power translate into gendered meritocracy beliefs, such that power reinforces meritocracy perceptions when employees feel equipped to demonstrate merit and weakens these perceptions when authority is not matched by the resources the role demands.

Hypothesis 3a. *Structural power will be more positively associated with meritocracy perceptions for men than for women.*

Hypothesis 3b. *Perceived resource sufficiency will mediate the gender-moderated association between structural power and meritocracy perceptions, such that the indirect effect through PRS will be more negative for women than for men.*

2.4 | The Double-Edged Consequences of Meritocracy Perceptions

Meritocracy perceptions are consequential in part because they likely shape whether employees see effort as worthwhile. Specifically, when employees believe their organization allocates rewards based on effort and talent, they should be more likely to expect that their own efforts will be proportionally rewarded. This perceived link between effort, performance, and valued outcomes should strengthen motivation to pursue career advancement (Vroom 1964). This logic is also consistent with the organizational justice literature, which finds that perceptions of fair procedures and fair reward distributions are associated with more positive work attitudes, higher performance, and lower withdrawal (Cohen-Charash and Spector 2001; Colquitt et al. 2001; Kim and Beehr 2020). By contrast, when employees doubt that effort will be fairly rewarded, continued career

investment may appear less worthwhile. As the expected link between effort and reward weakens, employees may seek to restore balance by reducing their inputs, disengaging, or withdrawing from the exchange relationship between them and their organization (Adams 1965). Thus, stronger meritocracy perceptions should increase employees' intentions to invest in their careers and decrease intentions to withdraw.

The same perceptions that sustain individual career investment may also reduce support for equity-enhancing change. If employees believe their organization already rewards individuals based on merit, they may be less likely to view unequal outcomes as evidence of structural barriers or biased organizational processes. Instead, existing disparities may appear to reflect differences in individual effort, ability, or choice. Consistent with research on the paradox of meritocracy, organizations that emphasize meritocratic ideals can lead decision-makers to overlook the ways in which inequality is reproduced (Castilla and Benard 2010; McCoy and Major 2007). As a result, stronger meritocracy perceptions may reduce support for equity-enhancing initiatives because such interventions appear unnecessary and unjustified. Meritocracy perceptions therefore have a dual effect: they dampen individual career investment among powerful women while attenuating support for structural change among powerful men. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 4a. *Meritocracy perceptions will be positively associated with career investment intentions.*

Hypothesis 4b. *Meritocracy perceptions will be negatively associated with career withdrawal intentions.*

Hypothesis 4c. *Meritocracy perceptions will be negatively associated with support for equity-enhancing initiatives.*

2.5 | The Current Research

The present research tests the model shown in Figure 1 across four studies. Studies 1 and 2 use large-scale archival data from US federal employees to test whether structural power is more positively associated with PRS and meritocracy perceptions for men than for women, and whether PRS accounts for this

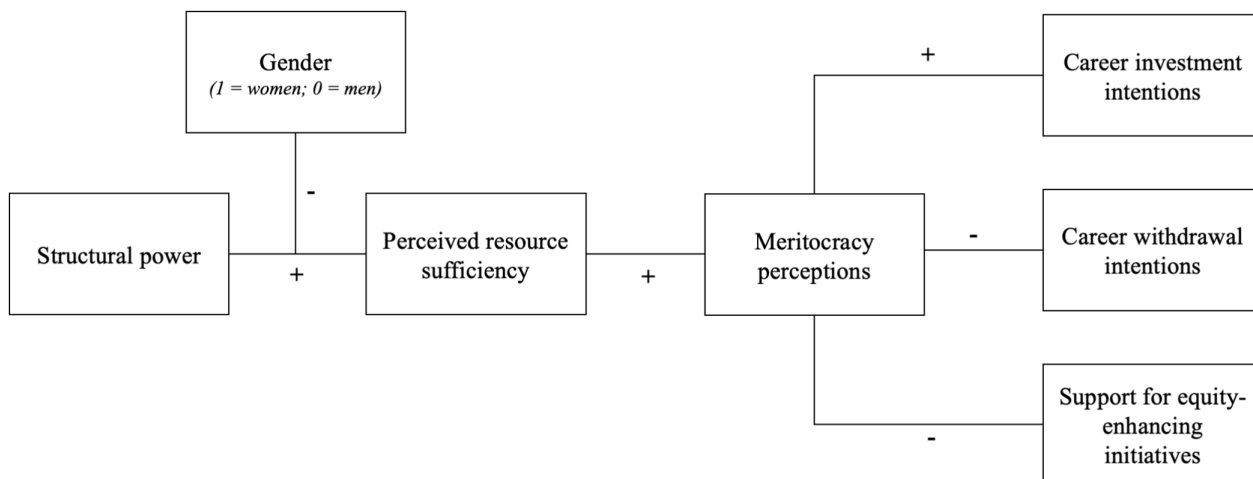


FIGURE 1 | Proposed theoretical model.

gendered association (H1–H3b). Study 2 additionally tests whether meritocracy perceptions positively predict career investment intentions and negatively predict career withdrawal intentions (H4a–H4b). Study 3 uses a preregistered qualitative survey of managers to examine whether PRS emerges as a lay explanation for the gendered power–meritocracy pattern and to clarify the construct’s content. Study 4 experimentally manipulates PRS among powerholders to test its effects on meritocracy perceptions and meritocracy perceptions’ downstream associations with career investment intentions, career withdrawal intentions, and support for an equity-enhancing initiative (H2, H4a–H4c).

2.6 | Transparency and Openness

All code, along with data and materials for Studies 3 and 4, is available on the Open Science Framework (<https://tinyurl.com/powergendermerit>), together with the Supporting Information document. Data for Studies 1 and 2 were obtained from the US Office of Personnel Management (<https://www.opm.gov/fevs/>) and the US Merit Systems Protection Board (<https://www.mspb.gov/foia/SurveyData.htm>), respectively. Analyses were conducted using R Studio Statistical Software (version 2024.04.2+764) and SPSS (version 29.0.1.0) and comply with the Journal of Organizational Behavior guidelines.

3 | Study 1

Study 1 examined whether structural power was more positively associated with PRS for men than for women (H1), whether PRS was positively associated with meritocracy perceptions (H2), whether structural power was more positively associated with meritocracy perceptions for men than for women (H3a), and whether the gender difference in the power–meritocracy link was mediated by PRS (H3b). To test these predictions, we leveraged cross-sectional archival data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, an annual survey administered by the US Office of Personnel Management.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Research Context, Sample, and Variables

The Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey is administered annually by the US Office of Personnel Management across federal agencies using a stratified sampling approach and has been used in dozens of peer-reviewed empirical studies of federal workforce attitudes and behaviors (Fernandez et al. 2015). The survey is administered anonymously across 40 government agencies that vary widely in norms, values, and cultures, supporting the generalizability of our findings and minimizing concerns about socially desirable responding.

We report results from the 2008 subsample which had 71 430 responses (47% women; 85.0% White, 9.2% Black or African American, 4.7% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.9% Asian, 0.2% two or more races) because it contained the most granular and continuous measures of both hierarchical rank

and compensation, allowing for a precise operationalization of structural power. Subsequent waves either omitted compensation, measured it with fewer response options, or used coarser binary rank indicators that obscure whether men and women occupied equivalent positions of formal authority. Because comparing men and women at similar levels of power is essential to isolating gendered experiences of power, the continuous 2008 measures allowed us to capture meaningful variation across managerial roles rather than collapsing distinct positions (e.g., supervisor vs. executive) into a single category.

We also analyzed all other available years containing the meritocracy outcome measure (2006, 2010–2019) in Supplemental Studies 1a–1k (see Supporting Information for results); waves after 2019 dropped the meritocracy item in favor of post-COVID workplace questions. Results were consistent with our predictions in nine of eleven subsamples. Because the survey’s anonymous format precludes longitudinal tracking, we analyzed each wave separately.

3.1.1.1 | Predictor Variable- Gender. Participants self-identified as male (0) or female (1).

3.1.1.2 | Predictor Variable- Structural Power. Following prior research on managerial power (Finkelstein 1992), we operationalized structural power as a composite of participants’ hierarchical rank and compensation. Rank reflects formal authority over others’ behavior and decisions, whereas compensation provides an institutional indicator of one’s standing within the organization. As Finkelstein (1992) argues, even among individuals at similar hierarchical levels, differences in compensation reflect real disparities in influence and institutional standing. This multidimensional operationalization captures distinct facets of structural power. Participants indicated their rank by selecting one of five options: (1) Non-Supervisor, (2) Team Leader, (3) Supervisor, (4) Manager, or (5) Executive. They indicated compensation on a 6-point ordinal scale, with higher values reflecting higher pay grades. Participants who selected ‘Other’ for compensation (5.7%) were excluded due to lack of comparability. Both variables were standardized and averaged into a composite ($\alpha=0.47$); the two were moderately correlated, $r(67329)=0.31$, $p<0.001$.³

3.1.1.3 | Mediating Variable- Perceived Resource Sufficiency. Participants rated two items on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale: “I have sufficient resources (for example, people, materials, budget) to get my job done” and “I have enough information to do my job well.” Responses were averaged ($\alpha=0.57$). A small number of participants (0.7%) responded “Do not know” to the first item and were excluded; results are robust to recoding these responses as the scale midpoint (see Table S1). The measure was approximately normally distributed (skewness = −0.43).⁴

3.1.1.4 | Outcome Variable- Meritocracy Perceptions. We measured meritocracy perceptions with the item “Promotions in my work unit are based on merit,” rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale. This item directly captures whether individuals believe advancement is determined by merit. In a preregistered pilot study, 400 US-based Prolific participants (50% women) completed both this item

and the 15-item Perceptions That Meritocracy Exists Scale (Son Hing et al. 2011; $\alpha = 0.74$), and the two were highly correlated, $r(398) = 0.77$, $p < 0.001$. Participants could respond “Do not know” (4.24%); these responses were dropped, though results are robust to recoding them as the scale midpoint (see Table S1). Responses were normally distributed (skewness = -0.25).

3.1.1.5 | Control Variables. We tested whether our focal findings were robust to controls for tenure and under-represented racial minority (URM) status, as both predict perceptions of organizational fairness (e.g., Heilman 2001; Reynolds and Helfers 2018). Tenure was measured categorically (e.g., “6 to 10 years”) and converted to a numerical variable using interval midpoints. Participants identifying as White were coded as non-URM (coded as 0); all others were coded as URM (coded as 1). Correlations and descriptives are reported in Table 1.

3.1.2 | Results

3.1.2.1 | Analytic Approach. For both PRS (H1) and meritocracy perceptions (H3a), we used hierarchical linear mixed-effects models (via the *lmer* function in R) with a random intercept for participant agency to account for the nested structure of the data. For each outcome, we estimated four models. Models 1 and 2 tested the main effects of gender and structural power and their interaction, respectively, and Models 3 and 4 replicated this sequence adding controls for tenure and URM status. To probe significant Gender $\times$ Structural Power interactions in Model 4, we report two sets of follow-up estimates: (a) simple slopes of structural power separately for men and women, and (b) the gender difference in the outcome at higher (+1) and lower (−1) values of the standardized structural power composite, obtained by reparameterizing Model 4 at each anchor. To test whether PRS was positively associated with meritocracy perceptions (H2), we first regressed meritocracy perceptions on PRS, then added controls.

3.1.2.2 | Hypothesis 1. Consistent with H1, Model 4 revealed a significant Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction on PRS, $b = -0.13$, $t(66663) = -12.95$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 2). Structural power was positively associated with PRS for men, $b = 0.03$, $t(65981) = 4.03$, $p < 0.001$, but negatively associated with PRS for women, $b = -0.11$, $t(66636) = -12.47$, $p < 0.001$. At higher structural power, women reported significantly lower PRS than men, $b = -0.10$, $t(66664) = -7.56$, $p < 0.001$. At lower structural power, women reported significantly higher PRS than men, $b = 0.16$, $t(66648) = 13.43$, $p < 0.001$. See Figure 2.

3.1.2.3 | Hypothesis 2. Consistent with H2, PRS was positively associated with meritocracy perceptions, $b = 0.55$, $t(67936) = 116.74$, $p < 0.001$. This association held when controlling for gender, structural power, tenure, and URM status, $b = 0.56$, $t(63818) = 120.99$, $p < 0.001$.

3.1.2.4 | Hypothesis 3a. Consistent with H3a, Model 4 revealed a significant Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction, $b = -0.05$, $t(64261) = -4.13$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 3). The relationship between structural power and meritocracy perceptions was stronger for men, $b = 0.47$, $t(63279) = 57.57$, $p < 0.001$, than for women, $b = 0.41$, $t(64205) = 37.18$, $p < 0.001$. At higher structural power, women reported significantly lower meritocracy perceptions than men, $b = -0.04$, $t(64252) = -2.48$, $p = 0.013$. At lower structural power, women reported significantly higher meritocracy perceptions than men, $b = 0.07$, $t(64223) = 4.18$, $p < 0.001$. See Figure 3.⁵

3.1.2.5 | Hypothesis 3b. We conducted a moderated mediation analysis using Model 8 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2022) in SPSS with 10 000 bootstrapped samples, entering structural power as the predictor, gender as the moderator, PRS as the mediator, and meritocracy perceptions as the outcome, with tenure and URM status included as covariates (see Figure 4). The index of moderated mediation was significant, $b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.006$, 95% CI $[-0.082$,

TABLE 1 | Means, standard deviations, and correlations with confidence intervals (Study 1).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Structural power	−0.07	0.74					
2. Female	0.47	0.50	−0.22**				
			[−0.23, −0.22]				
3. PRS	3.46	0.90	−0.03**	0.04**			
			[−0.03, −0.02]	[0.03, 0.05]			
4. Meritocracy Perceptions	3.03	1.21	0.26**	−0.05**	0.41**		
			[0.26, 0.27]	[−0.06, −0.04]	[0.41, 0.42]		
5. Tenure	14.81	6.26	0.30**	−0.04**	−0.03**	0.04**	
			[0.29, 0.31]	[−0.05, −0.04]	[−0.03, −0.02]	[0.03, 0.04]	
6. URM status	0.15	0.36	−0.20**	0.31**	0.07**	−0.05**	−0.03**
			[−0.21, −0.20]	[0.30, 0.32]	[0.06, 0.08]	[−0.06, −0.05]	[−0.04, −0.02]

Note: M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. The confidence interval is a plausible range of population correlations that could have caused the sample correlation (Cumming 2014).

*Indicates $p < 0.05$.

**Indicates $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 2 | Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (Study 1).

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Estimates	Statistic	p	Estimates	Statistic	p	Estimates	Statistic	p	Estimates	Statistic	p
(Intercept)	3.50	120.89	<0.001	3.49	120.55	<0.001	3.52	118.14	<0.001	3.51	117.38	<0.001
Structural power	−0.04	−7.41	<0.001	0.02	2.72	0.007	−0.02	−3.67	<0.001	0.03	4.03	<0.001
Female	0.06	8.32	<0.001	0.04	5.82	<0.001	0.04	5.48	<0.001	0.03	3.71	<0.001
Tenure							−0.00	−3.83	<0.001	−0.00	−3.37	0.001
URM status							0.15	14.36	<0.001	0.13	12.45	<0.001
Structural power × female				−0.15	−14.90	<0.001				−0.13	−12.95	<0.001
Random effects												
σ^2	0.79			0.79				0.79			0.78	
ICC	0.04			0.04				0.04			0.04	
Number of agencies	40			40				40			40	
Observations	66 844			66 844				66 671			66 671	
Marginal R^2 / conditional R^2	0.003/0.040			0.006/0.043				0.006/0.042			0.009/0.045	

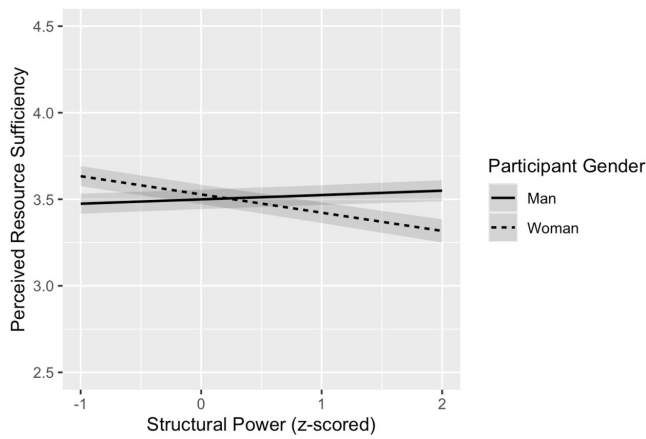


FIGURE 2 | Gender $\times$ Structural Power on predicting PRS (Study 1).

−0.059]. Consistent with H3b, the indirect effect of structural power on meritocracy perceptions through PRS was positive and significant for men, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.003$, 95% CI [0.017, 0.031], but negative and significant for women, $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.005$, 95% CI [−0.055, −0.037]. Once PRS was included in the model, the direct interaction between structural power and gender on meritocracy perceptions was nonsignificant, $F(1, 64\,260) = 2.76$, $p = 0.097$.^{6,7}

4 | Study 1 Discussion

Study 1 found that in a large, occupationally diverse sample of US federal employees, structural power was associated with higher PRS for men but lower PRS for women, consistent with H1. PRS in turn was positively associated with meritocracy perceptions (H2). The positive link between structural power and meritocracy perceptions was significantly weaker for women than for men (H3a). Finally, this gendered power–meritocracy link was mediated by PRS (H3b). To our knowledge, these findings provide the first evidence that employees occupying the same structurally powerful positions perceive fundamentally different levels of resource sufficiency and meritocracy depending on gender, and that PRS statistically accounts for this divergence. These findings complement qualitative work showing that women's formal authority often fails to translate into the informal support and latitude afforded to comparable men (Ibarra et al. 2013; Reid 2015) and evidence that high-power women receive less personnel support than equally positioned men (Lee and Kray 2021), extending this work to women's subjective perceptions of resource sufficiency. More broadly, the findings provide initial support for our extension of the JD–R framework by showing that the perceived balance between job demands and resources scales differently with structural power for women and men, shaping subsequent meritocracy perceptions.

As a supplementary test, we additionally examined whether these findings replicated across the remaining FEVS waves (Supplemental Studies 1a–1k). Across 11 different samples spanning 13 years and more than 3 million federal employees, H1, H2, and the moderated mediation (H3b) were supported in every sample, whereas the interaction on meritocracy perceptions (H3a) replicated in 9 of 11 samples.

One pattern from Study 1 that was not anticipated by our theorizing was a crossover pattern in the Gender $\times$ Structural Power interactions, whereby women at lower levels of structural power reported higher PRS and higher meritocracy perceptions than low-power men. Across the supplemental studies, however, this crossover was much more consistent for PRS (8 of 11 samples) than for meritocracy perceptions (1 of 11 samples), suggesting that the more reliable phenomenon at lower power is women's higher PRS. Although speculative, this pattern may reflect resource substitution theory, which describes how workplace resources tend to carry greater psychological benefit for more disadvantaged employees (Moen et al. 2016; Ross and Mirowsky 2006), or the fact that women are less underrepresented at lower organizational levels (Kanter 1977) and may have greater access to supportive workplace relationships and help-seeking resources than similarly low-power men (Addis and Mahalik 2003; DiBenigno 2026; Ely 1994; Eagly 2009; Melin and Correll 2022; Melin et al. 2026; Tamres et al. 2002; Yarmar et al. 2026). Nevertheless, we maintain a theoretical focus on the high-power gender gap because women's underrepresentation is more pronounced at senior organizational levels and because those in powerful roles are best positioned to shape the systems that sustain or reduce inequities.

To examine whether this pattern generalizes beyond the federal workforce, Supplemental Study 2 analyzed administrative records from a large STEM organization. Although these data did not include PRS and therefore could not test the full mediated model, structural power was again more positively associated with meritocracy perceptions for men than for women, replicating H3a in a private-sector context.

5 | Study 2

Study 2 conceptually replicates and extends Study 1 in three ways. First, we leverage the 2021 Merit Principles Survey, a large survey of US federal employees explicitly designed to assess adherence to merit-based principles, providing a particularly stringent test of H1, H2, H3a, and H3b. Second, the 2021 Merit Principles Survey includes a multi-item scale capturing several dimensions of perceived meritocracy, allowing us to examine whether the Study 1 findings generalize across measurement approaches. Third, the survey's multi-item career intentions measure allows us to test whether meritocracy perceptions are positively associated with advancement intentions (H4a) and negatively associated with withdrawal intentions (H4b), extending the findings from Study 1 to downstream motivational outcomes predicted by the JD–R framework (Bakker and Demerouti 2007).

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Research Context, Sample, and Variables

The Merit Principles Survey is anonymously administered every 3–5 years to measure federal employees' views on issues such as workplace fairness and personnel practices. The Merit Systems Protection Board selects 25 major departments and agencies to participate in the survey. Employees are selected

TABLE 3 | Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (Study 1).

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Estimates	Statistic	p	Estimates	Statistic	p	Estimates	Statistic	p	Estimates	Statistic	p
(Intercept)	3.06	86.56	<0.001	3.05	86.51	<0.001	3.25	90.05	<0.001	3.24	89.94	<0.001
Structural Power	0.42	65.30	<0.001	0.44	55.64	<0.001	0.45	66.03	<0.001	0.47	57.57	<0.001
Female	0.01	1.11	0.268	0.00	0.44	0.660	0.02	1.58	0.113	0.01	1.07	0.284
Tenure							−0.01	−15.52	<0.001	−0.01	−15.37	<0.001
URM Status							−0.00	−0.17	0.865	−0.01	−0.72	0.470
Structural Power × Female				−0.06	−4.45	<0.001				−0.05	−4.13	<0.001
Random effects												
σ^2	1.33				1.33			1.32			1.32	
ICC	0.03				0.03			0.03			0.03	
Number of agencies	40				40			40			40	
Observations	64 426				64 426			64 267			64 267	
Marginal R^2 / conditional R^2	0.067/0.097			0.067/0.098			0.070/0.098			0.071/0.099		

via random-stratified samples (based on organization and demographics) out of the roughly two million workers employed by the federal government. We analyzed data from the 2021 Merit Principles Survey, as this was the most recent publicly available dataset at the time of analysis. In 2021, 100 234 full-time permanent employees and managers from across the Federal Government were invited to complete the survey. The dataset contained 33 139 unique responses (a 33% response rate).

5.1.1.1 | Predictor Variable- Gender. Participants self-identified as female (coded as 1; 37%) or male (coded as 0; 45%). Eighteen percent of respondents did not disclose their gender and were excluded from our analysis, leaving 27 284 respondents.⁸

5.1.1.2 | Predictor Variable- Structural Power. As in Study 1, we created a composite measure of participants' hierarchical rank and compensation to measure structural power. Participants indicated their rank by selecting from one of the following survey responses: (1) non-supervisor who did not supervise others; (2) a team leader who provided employees with day-to-day guidance on work projects, but did not have supervisory responsibilities or conduct performance appraisals; (3) a supervisor who assigned work, evaluated employee performance, and approved or disapproved leave requests, but did not supervise other supervisors; (4) a manager who is in a management position and supervises other supervisors; (5) an executive who is in the Senior Executive Service or equivalent and supervises

managers or other executives. Participants indicated their annual compensation by selecting one of the following four options: (1) less than \$74 999; (2) between \$75 000 and \$99 999; (3) between \$100 000 and \$149 999; (4) over \$150 000. We standardized rank and compensation by z-scoring each measure. Standardized measures for rank and compensation were correlated, $r(29225)=0.51$, $p<0.001$. We averaged the two standardized measures to create a measure of structural power ($\alpha=0.68$).

5.1.1.3 | Mediating Variable- Perceived Resource Sufficiency. To assess PRS, we utilized participants' responses to the item "I have the resources to do my job well", which was measured on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale. A small percentage (0.10%) responded with "Do not know/NA" and were dropped from the analysis. Responses were moderately negatively skewed (skewness = -0.84), reflecting a clustering of responses at the higher end of the scale. Results are robust to ordinal logistic regression and log transformation specifications (see [Supporting Information](#) p. 6).

5.1.1.4 | Outcome Variable- Meritocracy Perceptions. The survey included an 18-item scale titled "Adhering to Merit System Principles," with items assessed on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale. An exploratory factor analysis with principal components extraction and varimax rotation revealed two distinct components explaining 66.0% of total variance ($KMO=0.97$). Eleven items reflected the organization's efficient management of human capital (e.g., "My organization uses the workforce efficiently and effectively"). These items were analyzed separately as a Talent Management subscale ($\alpha=0.94$; see [Table S2](#)).

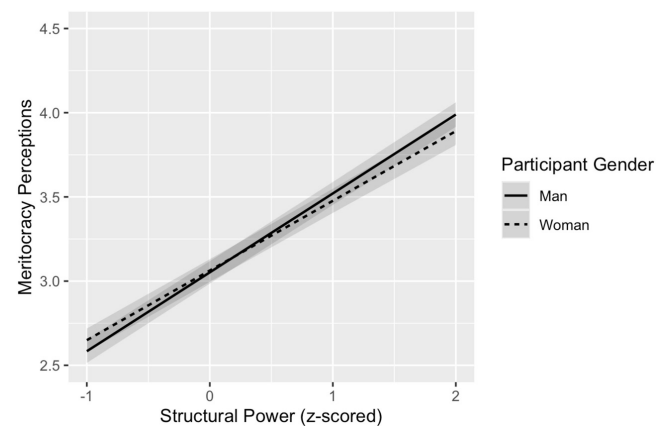


FIGURE 3 | Gender $\times$ Structural Power predicting meritocracy perceptions (Study 1).

The remaining seven items mapped onto our conceptual definition of meritocracy perceptions and were averaged to form our focal measure ($\alpha=0.92$): "My organization does not engage in favoritism", "My organization holds fair and open competition for job vacancies", "My organization selects the best-qualified candidates when filling jobs", "My organization recruits a diverse pool of applicants for job vacancies", "My organization pays employees fairly", "My organization recognizes excellent performance", and "My organization protects employees against arbitrary action." Responses were approximately normally distributed (skewness = -0.48). Participants could respond 'Do not know/NA' (between 1.56% and 14.47% did so across the seven items) and were excluded; results are robust to recoding these as the scale midpoint (see [Table S3](#)).⁹

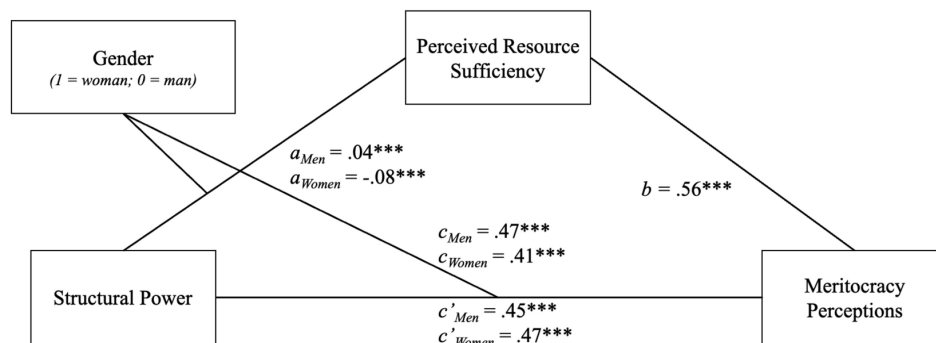


FIGURE 4 | Moderated mediation model (Study 1).

5.1.1.5 | Convergent and Discriminant Validity. As noted in Study 1, we conducted a preregistered pilot study with 400 employed US-based Prolific participants (50% women), in which participants responded to Study 1's single-item meritocracy measure, Study 2's seven-item meritocracy subscale ($\alpha=0.93$), and the full 15-item Perceptions That Meritocracy Exists Scale (Son Hing et al. 2011; $\alpha=0.74$) in relation to their own workplaces. The Study 2 meritocracy scale correlated strongly with the Study 1 meritocracy measure, $r(398)=0.85$, $p<0.001$, and with the Son Hing et al. (2011) scale, $r(398)=0.81$, $p<0.001$. An exploratory factor analysis with principal components extraction and varimax rotation revealed that meritocracy items from Studies 1 and 2 loaded onto a common factor alongside nine of the 15 Son Hing et al. (2011) items (loadings ranging from 0.56 to 0.80), supporting cross-study convergence between the meritocracy measures. PRS items from Studies 1 and 2 loaded onto a separate factor (loadings ranging from 0.82 to 0.88) from all meritocracy items, supporting discriminant validity between PRS and meritocracy perceptions.

5.1.1.6 | Secondary Outcome Variable—Career Investment Intentions. Participants rated their agreement with four items assessing their plans to invest in their career over the next 2 years, each on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale: "continue in your current job and role at the same level of responsibility," "take on new challenges, assignments, or roles in your current job," "take on higher-level technical responsibilities," and "take on supervisory or managerial responsibilities." Responses were averaged to form a Career Investment composite ($\alpha=0.66$) reflecting four distinct facets of career investment: continued engagement in one's current role, lateral growth, technical advancement, and managerial advancement.

5.1.1.7 | Secondary Outcome Variable—Career Withdrawal Intentions. Participants rated their agreement with four items assessing their plans to withdraw from their career over the next 2 years, each on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale: "reduce your work hours or responsibilities," "move to a different occupation or line of work," "move to a different organization or agency within the Federal Government," and "resign from the Federal Government." Responses were averaged to form a Career Withdrawal composite ($\alpha=0.76$).

5.1.1.8 | Control Variables. Consistent with Study 1, we controlled for tenure and URM status (coded as 1). Tenure was provided as ranges and converted to a numeric variable using interval midpoints. URM status was operationalized using the dataset's White/non-White indicator. Means, standard deviations, and correlations are reported in Table 4.

5.1.2 | Results

5.1.2.1 | Analytic Approach. For both PRS (H1) and meritocracy perceptions (H3a), we used hierarchical linear mixed-effects models (via the *lmer* function in R) with a random intercept for participant agency to account for the nested structure of the data. For each outcome, we estimated four models. Models 1 and 2 tested the main effects of gender and structural power and their interaction, respectively, and Models 3 and 4

replicated this sequence adding controls for tenure and URM status. To probe significant Gender $\times$ Structural Power interactions in Model 4, we report two sets of follow-up estimates: (a) simple slopes of structural power separately for men and women, and (b) the gender difference in the outcome at higher (+1) and lower (−1) values of the standardized structural power composite, obtained by reparameterizing Model 4 at each anchor. To test whether PRS was positively associated with meritocracy perceptions (H2), we first regressed meritocracy perceptions on PRS, then added controls. To examine whether meritocracy perceptions predicted career investment intentions (H4a) and career withdrawal intentions (H4b), we regressed each outcome on meritocracy perceptions, then added gender, structural power, tenure, and URM status as controls.

5.1.2.2 | Hypothesis 1. Consistent with H1, Model 4 revealed a significant Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction on PRS, $b=-0.09$, $t(25802)=-6.09$, $p<0.001$ (see Table 5 for all models). Structural power was unrelated to PRS for men, $b=-0.02$, $t(25719)=-1.54$, $p=0.123$, but negatively associated with PRS for women, $b=-0.11$, $t(25757)=-8.95$, $p<0.001$. At higher structural power, women reported significantly lower PRS than men, $b=-0.12$, $t(25816)=-5.74$, $p<0.001$. At lower structural power, women reported significantly higher PRS than men, $b=0.07$, $t(25816)=3.34$, $p<0.001$, replicating Study 1's crossover pattern. See Figure 5.

5.1.2.3 | Hypothesis 2. Consistent with H2, PRS was positively associated with meritocracy perceptions, $b=0.42$, $t(25251)=87.27$, $p<0.001$. This association held when controlling for gender, structural power, tenure, and URM status, $b=0.42$, $t(20474)=82.87$, $p<0.001$.

5.1.2.4 | Hypothesis 3a. Consistent with H3a, Model 4 revealed a significant Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction on meritocracy perceptions, $b=-0.06$, $t(20502)=-4.13$, $p<0.001$ (see Table 6 for all models). The relationship between structural power and meritocracy perceptions was stronger for men, $b=0.30$, $t(20503)=30.21$, $p<0.001$, than for women, $b=0.24$, $t(20515)=21.24$, $p<0.001$. At higher structural power, women reported significantly lower meritocracy perceptions than men, $b=-0.09$, $t(20516)=-4.90$, $p<0.001$. At lower structural power, the effect of gender did not reach significance, $b=0.03$, $t(20515)=1.26$, $p=0.207$. See Figure 6.¹⁰

5.1.2.5 | Hypothesis 3b. We conducted a moderated mediation analysis using Model 8 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2022) in SPSS with 10000 bootstrapped samples, entering structural power as the predictor, gender as the moderator, PRS as the mediator, and meritocracy perceptions as the outcome, with tenure and URM status included as covariates (see Figure 7). The index of moderated mediation was significant, $b=-0.04$, $SE=0.007$, 95% CI $[-0.055, -0.026]$. Consistent with Hypothesis 3b, the indirect effect of structural power on meritocracy perceptions through PRS was nonsignificant for men, $b=-0.002$, $SE=0.005$, 95% CI $[-0.012, 0.008]$, and significant and negative for women, $b=-0.04$, $SE=0.006$, 95% CI $[-0.054, -0.031]$. Once PRS was included in the model, the direct interaction between structural power and gender on meritocracy perceptions dropped to nonsignificance, $F(1, 20474)=1.90$, $p=0.168$.^{11,12}

TABLE 4 | Means, standard deviations, and correlations with confidence intervals (Study 2).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Structural power	0.00	0.87							
2. Female	0.46	0.50	−0.12**						
			[−0.13, −0.11]						
3. PRS	3.77	1.09	−0.02**	−0.00					
			[−0.04, −0.01]	[−0.01, 0.01]					
4. Meritocracy perceptions	3.56	0.96	0.23**	−0.07**	0.49**				
			[0.21, 0.24]	[−0.08, −0.05]	[0.48, 0.50]				
5. Career investment	3.65	0.82	0.12**	−0.05**	0.24**	0.34**			
			[0.10, 0.13]	[−0.06, −0.03]	[0.23, 0.25]	[0.33, 0.36]			
6. Career withdrawal	2.08	0.78	−0.14**	−0.01	−0.26**	−0.35**	−0.24**		
			[−0.15, −0.13]	[−0.02, 0.01]	[−0.27, −0.25]	[−0.36, −0.34]	[−0.25, −0.23]		
7. Tenure	15.38	9.09	0.39**	0.03**	0.00	−0.02**	−0.12**	−0.05**	
			[0.38, 0.40]	[0.01, 0.04]	[−0.01, 0.02]	[−0.03, −0.01]	[−0.13, −0.11]	[−0.06, −0.03]	
8. URM status	0.35	0.48	−0.13**	0.11**	0.03**	−0.10**	0.03**	0.16**	−0.03**
			[−0.14, −0.12]	[0.10, 0.12]	[0.02, 0.04]	[−0.12, −0.09]	[0.01, 0.04]	[0.14, 0.17]	[−0.05, −0.02]

Note: M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. The confidence interval is a plausible range of population correlations that could have caused the sample correlation (Cumming 2014).

*Indicates $p < 0.05$.

**Indicates $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 5 | Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (Study 2).

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Estimates	Statistic	p	Estimates	Statistic	p	Estimates	Statistic	p	Estimates	Statistic	p
(Intercept)	3.81	118.19	<0.001	3.81	117.88	<0.001	3.76	107.34	<0.001	3.76	107.07	<0.001
Structural Power	−0.05	−6.40	<0.001	−0.01	−0.87	0.386	−0.06	−6.57	<0.001	−0.02	−1.54	0.123
Female	−0.01	−0.88	0.381	−0.01	−0.98	0.325	−0.02	−1.78	0.076	−0.03	−1.84	0.066
Tenure							0.00	2.76	0.006	0.00	2.80	0.005
URM Status							0.07	4.83	<0.001	0.07	4.77	<0.001
Structural Power × Female				−0.10	−6.31	<0.001				−0.09	−6.09	<0.001
Random effects												
σ^2	1.15				1.15			1.15			1.15	
ICC	0.02				0.02			0.02			0.02	
Number of agencies	25				25			25			25	
Observations	27114				27114			25822			25822	
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.002/0.022				0.003/0.023			0.003/0.024			0.004/0.025	

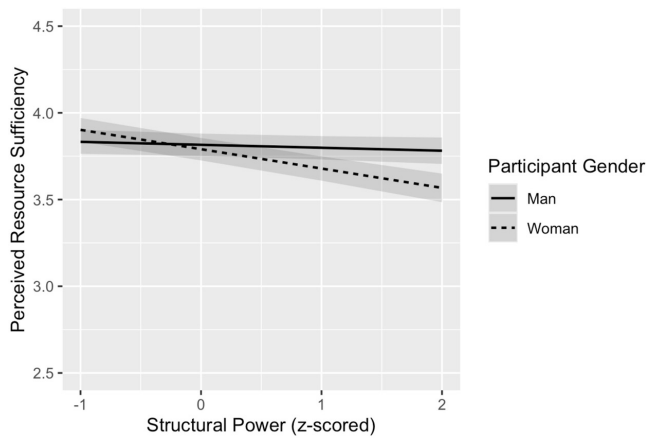


FIGURE 5 | Gender $\times$ Structural Power on predicting PRS (Study 2).

5.1.2.6 | Hypothesis 4a. Consistent with H4a, meritocracy perceptions were positively associated with career investment intentions, $b = 0.30$, $t(19004) = 52.09$, $p < 0.001$. This association held when controlling for gender, structural power, tenure, and URM status, $b = 0.28$, $t(16703) = 43.82$, $p < 0.001$.

5.1.2.7 | Hypothesis 4b. Consistent with H4b, meritocracy perceptions were negatively associated with career withdrawal intentions, $b = -0.29$, $t(20381) = -52.42$, $p < 0.001$. This association held when controlling for gender, structural power, tenure, and URM status, $b = -0.27$, $t(18017) = -44.72$, $p < 0.001$.

6 | Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 replicated support for H1–H3 in a federal dataset explicitly designed to assess adherence to merit-based principles. Consistent with the broader pattern across Study 1 and Supplemental Studies 1a–1k, Study 2 also replicated the lower-power crossover for PRS, but not for meritocracy perceptions, suggesting that this crossover is more robust for PRS than for meritocracy perceptions. Importantly, Study 2 provided initial evidence that meritocracy perceptions carry consequential implications for employees' career trajectories. Specifically, meritocracy perceptions were positively associated with career investment intentions (H4a) and negatively associated with career withdrawal intentions (H4b). These findings suggest that as women attain greater structural power, they may encounter more evidence that their organization does not equitably reward merit, pointing to a self-reinforcing cycle in which the women who ascend in the hierarchy may be more likely than their male counterparts to question whether it is worth ascending further.¹³

We note, however, that evidence of full statistical mediation does not imply PRS is the only pathway through which this association operates. Organizational identification, defined as the degree to which individuals incorporate the organization into their self-concept (Ashforth and Mael 1989), has been surfaced as an alternative mechanism linking structural power to hierarchy-legitimizing beliefs (Kennedy and Anderson 2017; To et al. 2024). Thus, we conducted three

supplemental studies testing whether gender moderated the relationship between structural power and organizational identification. Because the focal datasets did not contain measures that could be used as proxies for organizational identification, we examined the 2022, 2023, and 2024 waves of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (Supplemental Studies S4a–S4c). The Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction on organizational identification was not significant in any wave, suggesting that differential identification is unlikely to account for the gendered pattern observed in the focal studies.

In summary, although the JD–R model has traditionally been used to explain employee-level attitudes and behaviors (Bakker and Demerouti 2007), our findings add a gendered dimension by showing that the perceived balance between job demands and resources scales asymmetrically with structural power for men and women. By linking PRS to career investment and withdrawal intentions, our findings carry implications for how employee-level motivational processes may aggregate up to sustain the broader organizational phenomenon of women's underrepresentation in positions of power.

7 | Study 3

Study 3 uses a preregistered qualitative design (<https://aspre dictated.org/d2m87i.pdf>) to examine whether managers recognize PRS as a plausible explanation for gendered differences in meritocracy perceptions among powerholders, serving two purposes. First, it provides construct validation for PRS. If PRS reflects a meaningful organizational experience, managers should spontaneously invoke resource-related constraints when explaining why senior women view their organizations as less meritocratic than senior men do. We therefore examined whether their open-ended explanations referenced the substantive content of PRS, including access to support, cooperation, information, sponsorship, and the resources needed to enact senior authority.

Second, Study 3 triangulates PRS against two alternative explanations for the gendered power–meritocracy link: organizational identification and gender bias. Gender bias is likely the most culturally available explanation for gendered organizational experiences, so we would expect managers to invoke it spontaneously. The theoretically informative question is whether PRS *also* surfaces as a distinct explanation, which would suggest that PRS captures a less immediately visible structural pathway through which formal authority translates into different experiences for men and women. Organizational identification is a second alternative, suggested by prior work finding that structural power produces system-legitimizing beliefs (Kennedy and Anderson 2017; To et al. 2024). If managers do not spontaneously invoke organizational identification, this finding would be consistent with our supplemental analyses showing no Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction predicting organizational identification. Together, these findings would provide converging evidence that PRS, which captures the gendered balance between job demands and resources, is a more plausible mechanism linking structural power to meritocracy perceptions than organizational identification.

TABLE 6 | Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (Study 2).

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Estimates	Statistic	<i>p</i>	Estimates	Statistic	<i>p</i>	Estimates	Statistic	<i>p</i>	Estimates	Statistic	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	3.62	104.46	<0.001	3.61	104.40	<0.001	3.86	103.82	<0.001	3.85	103.71	<0.001
Structural Power	0.23	32.24	<0.001	0.26	27.88	<0.001	0.28	34.49	<0.001	0.30	30.21	<0.001
Female	−0.06	−4.91	<0.001	−0.06	−4.64	<0.001	−0.04	−2.79	0.005	−0.03	−2.53	0.011
Tenure							−0.01	−17.09	<0.001	−0.01	−17.03	<0.001
URM Status							−0.13	−9.44	<0.001	−0.13	−9.49	<0.001
Structural Power × Female				−0.06	−4.60	<0.001				−0.06	−4.13	<0.001
Random effects												
σ^2		0.83			0.83			0.81			0.81	
ICC		0.03			0.03			0.03			0.03	
Number of agencies		25			25			25			25	
Observations		21 544			21 544			20 525			20 525	
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2		0.052/0.082			0.053/0.083			0.069/0.101			0.070/0.101	

7.1 | Method

7.1.1 | Participants, Procedure, and Measures

7.1.1.1 | Participants. Three hundred full-time US employees with managerial experience were recruited through Prolific. Eligibility required identifying as a man or woman, supervising at least one direct report, and holding at least one managerial responsibility (budget management, hiring, performance reviews, or goal setting). As preregistered, seven participants were excluded for failing an attention check, leaving 293 responses (50% women; $M_{age} = 41.2$ years, $SD_{age} = 10.3$ years; 35.2% with >10 years managerial experience, 81.9% in first-line or middle management).

7.1.1.2 | Procedure. Participants completed an online survey soliciting their professional interpretation of the gendered power–meritocracy link documented in Studies 1–2, following an approach used in prior research asking professionals to interpret empirical patterns based on their expertise (Rivera and Tilcsik 2016; Pedulla 2020). Participants read that surveys of thousands of employees at large organizations had found women to be less likely than men to view their organization as meritocratic (defined as rewards allocated based on talent and effort), with the gap widening among more senior employees after controlling for tenure, demographics, and job type. A reading-comprehension check followed, with correct answers

shown to those who erred. Participants' responses followed a four-stage process. In Stage 1, participants explained the pattern in their own words. In Stage 2, participants distributed explanatory weight across three candidate explanations (PRS, OI, and bias). In Stage 3, participants elaborated on their top-weighted explanation. In Stage 4, participants rated workplace experiences that might contribute to women's lower PRS in senior roles. This design captured PRS endorsement both spontaneously and relative to organizational identification and bias.

7.1.1.3 | Explanations for the Gendered Power–Meritocracy Link (Spontaneous Mentions). To analyze participants' responses from Stage 1, two co-authors independently scored each open-ended response (1=yes, 0=no) along three dimensions corresponding to the candidate explanations: (1) PRS, whether the response discussed women's lower access to material or instrumental resources in senior roles (e.g., budgets, information, sponsorship or mentorship, influential networks, informal support channels); (2) OI, whether the response discussed women's weaker identification with the organization's identity, values, or successes; and (3) bias, whether the response discussed how senior women face a less favorable evaluative environment than their male peers (e.g., being held to higher performance standards, facing pushback for assertive behavior). We treat PRS and bias as analytically distinct constructs that may be correlated in practice. Although gender bias refers to differential standards, treatment, and evaluation of men and women for identical behaviors and performance (Kray et al. 2025), PRS refers to the subjective appraisal of whether one has adequate resources to meet role demands and exercise authority effectively. Although gender bias may be one upstream cause of women's lower PRS, PRS captures the downstream psychological experience of those conditions rather than the bias itself.

Responses deemed non-codable by at least one coder ($n=18$; e.g., refusals to speculate, challenges to the premise, restatements of the broader gender gap without addressing the seniority interaction, vague replies) were excluded from analysis of the open-ended responses. For the remaining 275 responses, the two coders' ratings were averaged (1.00=both reviewers assigned the category, 0.50=one did, 0.00=neither did), yielding scales for PRS ($\alpha=0.67$) and bias ($\alpha=0.58$); α is not reported for organizational identification because it was never identified in the codable responses.

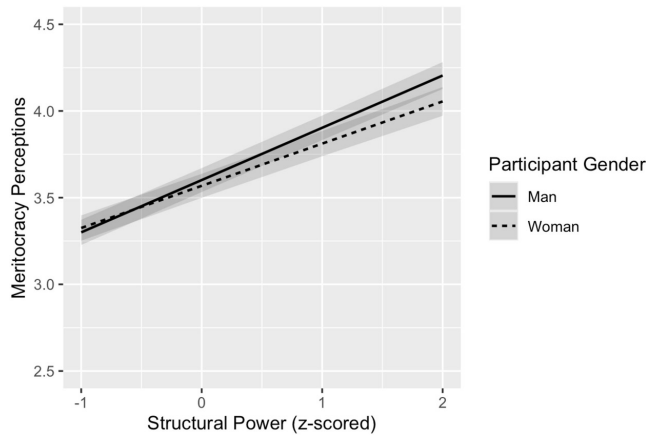


FIGURE 6 | Gender $\times$ Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (Study 2).

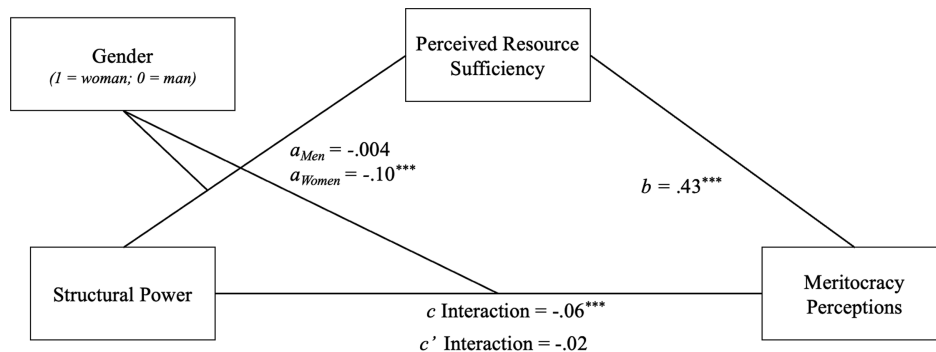


FIGURE 7 | Moderated mediation model (Study 2).

7.1.1.4 | Explanations for the Gendered Power–Meritocracy Link (Comparative Judgments). In Stage 2, participants distributed percentages (0%–100%, summing to 100) across three candidate mechanisms presented in counterbalanced order. The PRS explanation stated that senior women may receive less institutional support than male peers (e.g., fewer material and instrumental resources such as budgets, mentors, sponsors, and senior leadership support), requiring them to work harder for the same outcomes and leading them to question whether those outcomes are merit-based. The organizational identification explanation stated that senior women may be less identified with their organization than male peers, reducing their motivation to view it favorably. The bias explanation stated that senior women may face a less favorable evaluative environment than male peers (e.g., overlooked contributions, higher standards, pushback for assertive behavior), leading them to question whether organizational outcomes are merit-based. For exact wording, see survey materials on the OSF page. In Stage 3, participants then elaborated on their highest-weighted explanation, allowing us to clarify how respondents understood the selected mechanism, particularly when they identified PRS as most important.

7.1.1.5 | Substantive Content of PRS. In Stage 4, all participants rated nine items assessing workplace experiences that may contribute to women's lower PRS in senior roles. The prompt asked, "Thinking about why senior women may perceive their organizational resources as less sufficient than senior men do, to what extent do you believe each of the following contributes?" Each item began with the stem "Compared to men in similar roles, women in senior roles ... " and was rated from 1 (*does not contribute at all*) to 7 (*contributes very much*). Items spanned material resources (e.g., receive less staffing support, have smaller budgets or fewer financial resources), instrumental resources (e.g., receive less advocacy or sponsorship from more senior leaders, have less access to influential mentors or professional networks, have less access to informal decision-making channels or key information), and a role-related demand that may make available resources feel less sufficient (spending more time managing how they are perceived by others; Brescoll 2011; Eagly and Karau 2002).

7.1.2 | Results

7.1.2.1 | Explanations for the Gendered Power–Meritocracy Link (Spontaneous Mentions). PRS-based explanations were spontaneously mentioned in 22.9% of codable responses ($SD=0.38$), significantly greater than zero, $t(274)=9.87$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.60$. Bias-based explanations appeared more frequently, in 34.2% ($SD=0.42$), $t(274)=13.42$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.81$. OI-based explanations did not surface spontaneously.

7.1.2.2 | Explanations for the Gendered Power–Meritocracy Link (Comparative Judgments). Participants assigned a mean weight of 27.49% ($SD=12.68$) to PRS, which was significantly greater than zero, $t(292)=37.11$, $p<0.001$, $d=2.17$.

As preregistered, we also conducted a 3 (Explanation type: PRS, OI, bias; within-subjects) $\times$ 2 (Participant gender: man, woman; between-subjects) repeated-measures ANOVA on the percentage weights assigned to each explanation. We did not theorize a directional prediction for participant gender; the preregistered gender analyses are reported in the Supplement. The main effect of explanation type was significant, $F(2, 290)=80.87$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2_p=0.36$. Pairwise comparisons indicated that bias received significantly greater weight ($M=46.51$, $SD=18.42$) than both PRS (mean difference = 19.02, $p<0.001$) and organizational identification ($M=26.00$, $SD=17.67$; mean difference = 20.51, $p<0.001$), whereas PRS and organizational identification did not significantly differ (mean difference = 1.49, $p=0.296$).

Next, we examined follow-up elaborations in Stage 3 from participants who assigned PRS the greatest or tied-for-greatest explanatory weight. These managers often described PRS as having to work harder with less institutional support, particularly weaker sponsorship, limited access to leadership, and exclusion from the informal networks that shape opportunity at senior levels (see Table S5 for representative quotes from Stage 3). One respondent explained that when women have "a smaller budget, fewer coworkers to reach out to or even less access to leadership, they may have to work harder just to receive recognition," creating "a gap between expectations and the support provided" that makes outcomes feel "less tied to merit and more tied by access and opportunity." Sponsorship and leadership advocacy emerged as a distinct thread, with one manager noting that even "small differences in sponsorship or leadership support can significantly affect visibility, influence, and the ability to deliver results" at senior levels. Others emphasized exclusion from "informal discussions" among senior executives that take place "on the golf course or over drinks at the country club." Still others pointed to material gatekeeping, arguing that women are "asked to do more with less and then judged harshly if they do not meet expectations," and that when they request larger budgets, they are more likely to be asked, "Why do you need the money?"

7.1.2.3 | Substantive Content of PRS. We next examined which specific workplace experiences were perceived to contribute to senior women's lower PRS (Stage 4). Items were rated as contributing to women's lower PRS in the following order: spending more time managing how one is perceived by others ($M=5.42$; $SD=1.48$), receiving less advocacy or sponsorship from more senior leaders ($M=5.27$; $SD=1.51$), facing more resistance or pushback from subordinates ($M=5.15$; $SD=1.49$), being expected to take on more mentoring, committee work, and other tasks not tied to advancement ($M=5.01$; $SD=1.67$), having less access to influential mentors or professional networks ($M=4.97$; $SD=1.54$), having less access to informal decision-making channels or key information ($M=4.83$; $SD=1.54$), receiving less effort or cooperation from the teams they manage ($M=4.76$; $SD=1.55$), receiving less staffing support ($M=4.47$; $SD=1.58$), and having smaller budgets or fewer financial resources ($M=4.36$; $SD=1.62$).

8 | Study 3 Discussion

Study 3 advances our understanding of PRS in four ways. First, it validates PRS as a construct readily recognizable to managers. When explaining why senior women may view their organizations as less meritocratic than senior men do, managers surfaced many of the same experiences captured by our PRS construct: weaker sponsorship and advocacy, reduced access to influential networks and informal decision-making channels, lower cooperation from others, and greater role-related burdens. Second, Study 3 helps establish PRS as a distinct construct beyond gender bias-based explanations, which were the most culturally available accounts managers invoked. Although gender bias and PRS are likely intertwined, in that gender bias may be one reason women in powerful roles receive fewer resources, less cooperation, more scrutiny, or weaker sponsorship, PRS captures the downstream psychological experience of those conditions, namely whether one feels they have sufficient support, information, staffing, legitimacy, and cooperation to do the job well. PRS can therefore be shaped by bias, but it is not synonymous with it. Consistent with this distinction, although managers most often invoked bias, their open-ended responses also surfaced PRS as a separable account. Third, Study 3 provides little support for organizational identification as a driver of the Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction on meritocracy perceptions, as managers did not spontaneously invoke OI, consistent with our supplemental analyses showing no Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction on OI. Fourth, Study 3 clarifies the content of PRS. Managers viewed material resources (e.g., budgets, staffing) as relevant components but also emphasized social and instrumental supports as central to enacting senior authority.

Taken together, the findings from Study 3 suggest that PRS is underappreciated rather than unimportant. Bias may be the default explanation managers reach for when interpreting gendered organizational appraisals, but the prominence of bias does not exhaust the mechanisms through which gender shapes the experience of power. When concrete workplace experiences are brought into view, managers recognize PRS as a meaningful and substantively distinct account. These findings give confidence that PRS captures a structural mechanism through which formal authority may translate into less favorable meritocracy perceptions for women than for men, while also setting the stage for Study 4's more direct test of PRS as a mechanism.

9 | Study 4

Although the prior studies provided convergent evidence that PRS is associated with meritocracy perceptions in real organizational contexts, the cross-sectional nature of those data limits causal inference. Thus, the aim of the present study was to experimentally manipulate our key mechanism, PRS, in a workplace scenario to test whether PRS causally drives meritocracy perceptions (H2), and whether meritocracy perceptions in turn shape consequential downstream outcomes such as career intentions and behavioral support for an equity-enhancing organizational initiative (H4a–H4c). This study was preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/r6q36j.pdf>).

9.1 | Method

9.1.1 | Participants and Design

An a priori power analysis (G*Power; Faul et al. 2009) indicated that 260 participants would detect a small-to-medium effect of $d=0.35$ at 0.80 power ($\alpha=0.05$). To account for exclusions, 300 US-based full-time employees who self-identified as managers (using the same inclusion criteria as in Study 3) were recruited through Prolific for a two-cell between-subjects experiment (PRS: high vs. low). As preregistered, 14 participants were excluded for failing a basic attention check, leaving 286 responses (50% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 39.51$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.21$ years; 8% Asian; 11% Black/African American, 7% Hispanic/Latino, 71% White/Caucasian, 3% Other).

9.1.2 | Procedure

We asked all participants to imagine they worked as a Senior Director at a fictitious organization called CAS Corp, a mid-sized professional services firm with approximately 1200 employees that has been in operation since 2001. Holding structural power constant while manipulating PRS allowed us to isolate the causal effect of PRS on meritocracy perceptions and downstream outcomes. We did not manipulate structural power directly because the gendered conditions we theorize about (e.g., differential sponsorship, informal access, and accumulated material resources) reflect real-world asymmetries that a brief experimental induction cannot reproduce.

Participants read the following description of their role: “As a Senior Director, you supervise multiple teams and are responsible for evaluating their performance. Your role requires setting strategic direction, making consequential decisions under uncertainty, and driving outcomes that affect the organization's growth and competitive position. You have significant control over key organizational decisions such as budgets, hiring, and promotions, and you regularly participate in leadership meetings where company-wide decisions are discussed. The impact of your work is broad in scope, and your primary responsibility is to lead, grow, and shape the future of your part of the organization.”

Participants were then randomly assigned to a high or low PRS condition. In the high-PRS condition, participants read that compared to other Senior Directors at their level, they had considerably more resources, greater support, access to needed data and information, a more manageable and well-defined workload, regular mentorship and senior sponsorship, and substantial feedback and visibility. In the low-PRS condition, participants read that they had fewer resources, less support, frequent lack of access to needed data and information, a heavier and less focused workload, no mentorship or sponsorship, and limited feedback and visibility. For full manipulation text, see survey materials on the OSF page. Following the manipulation, participants briefly wrote about how they would feel in their role at CAS Corp before completing outcome measures.

9.1.3 | Meritocracy Perceptions

Participants completed a 13-item composite drawn from three sources, rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale ($\alpha = 0.97$). One item was adapted from the meritocracy measure used in Study 1 (“At CAS Corp, promotions are based on merit”). Seven items were drawn from the Merit Principles Survey used in Study 2 (“CAS Corp does not engage in favoritism”; “CAS Corp holds fair and open competition for job vacancies”; “CAS Corp selects the best-qualified candidates when filling jobs”; “CAS Corp recruits a diverse pool of applicants for job vacancies”; “CAS Corp pays employees fairly”; “CAS Corp recognizes excellent performance”; “CAS Corp protects employees against arbitrary action”). One item was adapted from the meritocracy measure used in Supplemental Study 2 (“Regardless of background, everyone at CAS Corp has an equal opportunity to succeed”). The remaining four items were adapted from the meritocracy manipulation used in Castilla and Benard (2010) (“At CAS Corp, all employees are rewarded fairly”; “At CAS Corp, whether employees deserve a raise is determined by their performance”; “At CAS Corp, raises and bonuses are based entirely on the performance of the employee”; “At CAS Corp, promotions are given to employees when their performance shows that they deserve it”).

9.1.4 | Career Intentions

Participants completed the same 8-item career intentions measure used in Study 2, rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale. Four items formed a career investment intentions subscale (example item: “take on higher-level technical responsibilities”; $\alpha = 0.89$), and the remaining four items formed a career withdrawal intentions subscale (example item: “resign from CAS Corp”; $\alpha = 0.82$).

9.1.5 | Support for Equity-Enhancing Initiative

Adapted from To et al. (2024), participants were asked to allocate a hypothetical \$50,000 budget surplus across six internal task forces with allocations summing to 100%. The six task forces were: Technology & IT, Finance & Operations, Marketing & Sales, Accounting, Equity & Compensation Fairness, and Ethics & Legal. Each task force was accompanied by a short description of its objective. The Equity & Compensation Fairness task force was described as: “Review and improve CAS Corp’s pay and evaluation practices to ensure rewards reflect performance by conducting compensation audits and developing standardized performance review procedures across divisions.” For descriptions of all six task forces, see survey materials on the OSF page. The percentage allocated to the Equity & Compensation Fairness task force served as the dependent variable.

9.1.6 | Manipulation Check

Participants indicated their PRS using three items adapted from Study 1 and Study 2 on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale ($\alpha = 0.98$): “I have sufficient resources (for example, people, materials, budget) to get my job done”; “I have

enough information to do my job well”; “I have the resources to do my job well.” Participants in the high-PRS condition reported significantly greater PRS ($M = 6.28$, $SD = 0.72$) than those in the low-PRS condition ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.30$), $t(284) = 33.11$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 3.92$. Participant gender and PRS condition did not interact, $F(1, 282) = 0.03$, $p = 0.854$, $\eta^2_p = 0.00$.

9.1.7 | Results

9.1.7.1 | Analytic Approach. For each outcome measure, we conducted independent samples *t*-tests by PRS condition. For downstream consequences (investment intentions, withdrawal intentions, and support for the Equity & Compensation Fairness initiative), we additionally tested for mediation via meritocracy perceptions using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes 2022) in SPSS with 10,000 bootstrapped samples, with PRS condition entered as the predictor (1 = *high PRS*, 0 = *low PRS*) and meritocracy perceptions as the mediator.

9.1.7.2 | Hypothesis 2. Consistent with H2, high-PRS participants reported higher meritocracy perceptions ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 0.98$) than low-PRS participants ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(284) = 11.76$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.39$.

9.1.7.3 | Hypothesis 4a. High-PRS participants reported higher career investment intentions ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 0.86$) than low-PRS participants ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.43$), $t(284) = 14.19$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.68$. Consistent with H4a, meritocracy perceptions predicted increased advancement intentions ($b = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$) and significantly mediated this effect (indirect effect: 0.72, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.50, 0.95]). The direct effect of PRS condition remained significant ($c' = 1.24$, $p < 0.001$), indicating partial mediation.

9.1.7.4 | Hypothesis 4b. High-PRS participants reported lower withdrawal intentions ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.02$) than low-PRS participants ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.05$), $t(284) = -16.77$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.98$. Consistent with H4b, meritocracy perceptions predicted decreased withdrawal intentions ($b = -0.20$, $p < 0.001$) and significantly mediated this effect (indirect effect: -0.30 , $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI $[-0.49, -0.12]$). The direct effect of PRS condition remained significant ($c' = -1.75$, $p < 0.001$), indicating partial mediation.

9.1.7.5 | Hypothesis 4c. Low-PRS participants allocated a marginally higher percentage of the budget to the Equity & Compensation Fairness task force ($M = 19.62\%$, $SD = 12.47$) than high-PRS participants ($M = 17.06\%$, $SD = 11.80$), $t(284) = -1.79$, $p = 0.075$, $d = -0.21$. Consistent with H4c, meritocracy perceptions predicted reduced support for the equity-enhancing task force ($b = -1.87$, $p = 0.005$) and significantly mediated this effect (indirect effect: -2.82 , $SE = 0.94$, 95% CI $[-4.74, -1.05]$). The direct effect of PRS condition was not significant ($c' = 0.26$, $p = 0.881$).

10 | Study 4 Discussion

Study 4 provides experimental evidence that PRS causally shapes meritocracy perceptions, as those with higher PRS

perceived their organizations as more meritocratic (H2), which in turn predicted greater career investment intentions, lower withdrawal intentions, but also reduced support for equity-enhancing initiatives (H4a–H4c). Although the PRS manipulation produced only a marginal direct effect on budget allocations to the equity-enhancing initiative, the indirect effect through meritocracy perceptions was significant and in the predicted direction, consistent with theorizing that meritocracy perceptions are a hierarchy-legitimizing belief that obscures organizational inequities (e.g., Castilla and Benard 2010). These results move our model beyond cross-sectional associations to establish PRS as a causal antecedent of meritocracy perceptions in a sample of working managers, while also highlighting the dual effects of meritocracy perceptions. More broadly, Study 4 extends the JD–R model by showing that PRS not only shapes employees' career investment and withdrawal intentions, but also whether they view the organizational status quo as legitimate or in need of reform.

Notably, when men and women were placed in identical resource environments, they reported nearly identical PRS. This finding is consistent with, though not affirmative evidence for, the possibility that the Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction on PRS observed in Studies 1 and 2 reflects differential exposure to resource conditions in real organizations rather than a general gender difference in how men and women perceive identical resource conditions. We acknowledge that strong inferences from a null interaction warrant caution.

One limitation of Study 4 is that our PRS manipulation was multi-component, simultaneously varying resources, support, data access, workload, mentorship, sponsorship, feedback, and visibility. Although this design choice was intentional, given we theorize PRS as an integrated appraisal spanning instrumental and material resources, Study 4 cannot identify which specific components of PRS drove the observed effects. Relatedly, the two PRS conditions were anchored at the extremes of the underlying construct. Although experiments often warrant anchoring manipulations at the endpoints, this design nonetheless raises the question of whether the observed effects generalize to more moderate real-world resource conditions. The convergent archival findings from Studies 1 and 2 speak to this concern, documenting parallel patterns in field settings where PRS varies naturally. Future research might systematically vary distinct components of PRS using stimulus-sampling designs to identify which elements are most consequential for meritocracy perceptions and their downstream effects.

11 | General Discussion

Meritocracy perceptions are not merely private beliefs; among powerholders, they help determine whether organizational inequity is challenged or left intact. Prior work shows that meritocracy beliefs can obscure structural inequities and reduce support for corrective change (Castilla 2008; Castilla and Benard 2010; Rosenthal et al. 2011; Son Hing et al. 2002; To et al. 2024), also suggesting that power itself may lead powerholders to view their organizations as more meritocratic (To et al. 2024). Yet because men hold most high-power roles

(Field et al. 2023), it is critical to know whether power predicts these beliefs similarly for men and women. Across four studies, we find that it does not. In Studies 1 and 2, structural power was more strongly associated with PRS and meritocracy perceptions for men than for women, and PRS statistically accounted for this gendered association (H1–H3b). Study 3 showed that managers recognized PRS as a meaningful explanation for this gap, especially through weaker sponsorship, informal access, cooperation, and support. Study 4 established the causal role of PRS, finding that higher PRS increased meritocracy perceptions, which in turn increased career investment, reduced career withdrawal, and weakened support for an equity-enhancing initiative (H2, H4a–H4c). Together, these findings show that structural power is not uniformly associated with stronger meritocracy beliefs; rather, this relationship depends on whether authority is accompanied by the resources needed to exercise it effectively.

11.1 | Theoretical and Organizational Implications

This research makes several contributions to our understanding of power, gender, and meritocracy beliefs in organizational contexts. Specifically, our work highlights a novel pathway through which the leadership gender gap may persist even after women attain power. Existing accounts of women's underrepresentation in senior leadership emphasize barriers to gaining or keeping power, including gender-stereotyped evaluations, glass cliff appointments, biased performance assessments, and structural obstacles to advancement (Bailyn 2003; Correll et al. 2020; Eagly and Karau 2002; Heilman 2012; Ibarra et al. 2013; Ryan and Haslam 2005). We shift attention to what happens to women *once they are in power*: they become disillusioned with the system itself. Because the resources accompanying authority accrue more slowly to women than to men, women in senior roles often lack the inputs needed to convert their effort into the visible, rewarded outcomes that anchor meritocratic systems. When effort does not translate into recognition, the premise that the organization rewards merit becomes harder to sustain. Women in power may therefore become less convinced that their effort will be rewarded, reducing their career investment and increasing their withdrawal intentions. Their better-resourced male counterparts, by contrast, view the organization as more meritocratic, which sustains their own career investment while reducing their support for equity-enhancing reform (Castilla and Benard 2010; To et al. 2024). The two halves of this mechanism reinforce each other: the women best positioned to ascend further become least convinced that ascent is worth pursuing, whereas the men with the authority to change the system are least likely to see the need for change. This account helps explain why increasing women's representation alone may be insufficient to close the gender gap in leadership (Field et al. 2023).

Additionally, we identify a within-person paradox at the level of powerholders, in which the same subjective organizational appraisal—meritocracy perceptions—that sustains powerholders' career engagement also suppresses their support for structural reform of the system that engages them. Organizational justice research has long established that perceived fair reward systems sustain motivation, engagement, and persistence (Cohen-Charash and Spector 2001; Colquitt et al. 2001; Vroom 1964).

Separately, the paradox of meritocracy literature has shown that meritocracy beliefs can obscure structural inequities, increase bias in evaluations, and reduce support for equity-enhancing change (Castilla and Benard 2010; McCoy and Major 2007; Son Hing et al. 2011; To et al. 2024). Our work integrates these two literatures at the level of individual powerholders. For those with the authority to reform organizational systems, the same belief that may make their own career investment feel worthwhile may also make the system seem less in need of change. Meritocracy perceptions therefore keep powerholders (i.e., disproportionately well-resourced men) invested in their own advancement while weakening their willingness to use their authority to address structural inequities. This finding refines existing accounts of meritocracy beliefs by showing that their consequences are not only a source of evaluator bias but also a proximal driver of how powerholders allocate institutional resources they have the authority to direct toward reform.

Further, by highlighting how gendered differences in perceived resource sufficiency may contribute to women's persistent underrepresentation in positions of power, our findings suggest that the JD–R framework (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Bakker et al. 2014) may extend beyond explaining employee functioning to illuminating broader organizational phenomena arising from systematic differences in the allocation of demands and resources. More broadly, organizational practices that distribute demands and resources unevenly across demographic groups, hierarchical levels, or occupations may shape outcomes such as leadership representation, support for organizational change, organizational culture, and the persistence of organizational inequality.

The present findings point to a practical challenge for organizational equity efforts: the men who most often hold the authority to reform organizational systems are also, according to our account, the most likely to view the system as already meritocratic. Because meritocracy beliefs are partly anchored in differential resource experiences, interventions that audit and correct gender disparities in the resources accompanying senior roles may shift powerholders' beliefs about whether the system works as it should. At the same time, closing these resource gaps may enable women to exercise authority more effectively in ways that reduce career withdrawal. Existing audit practices illustrate how organizations might undertake this process. In academic institutions, workload audits have documented gendered inequities in course loads, committee service, and advising and traced their downstream impact on tenure, promotion, and retention (O'Meara 2021; O'Meara et al. 2018). In the public-sector and policy space, gender audits examine how budgeting and programmatic decisions produce disparate impacts on women (Clancy and Mohlakoana 2020; Krug and Van Staveren 2002). By adapting these audit tools to assess the resources required to exercise authority effectively in a given setting, organizations may address the resource asymmetries that sustain gendered meritocracy beliefs at the top of the hierarchy.

11.2 | Limitations and Future Directions

The current research is not without limitations. First, the correlational nature of the archival data in Studies 1 and 2 restricts our ability to make causal claims about the gendered association

between structural power and PRS. Although our analyses are consistent with our theorized framework, we cannot fully rule out reverse causality or unmeasured third variables. Study 4 strengthens causal evidence for the focal pathway from PRS to meritocracy perceptions to downstream outcomes but does not establish the causal effect of structural power on PRS or the gendered nature of that effect. We considered manipulating structural power directly but concluded that the gendered conditions we theorize about, including differential access to sponsorship, informal networks, and material resources that accumulate over time, reflect real-world structural asymmetries that a brief experimental induction cannot meaningfully reproduce. Future research could adopt a pre-post design, measuring meritocracy beliefs, PRS, and distal outcomes shortly before and after employees receive a promotion to establish the focal gendered pathway causally.

Second, the archival nature of Studies 1 and 2 limited our ability to control the precise wording of survey items or deploy the multi-item scales used in prior academic research, and the measurement of core constructs varied somewhat across studies. Three considerations mitigate this concern. First, the archival approach afforded ecological validity, large and diverse samples, and generalizability across real-world organizational contexts. Second, the items we used exhibited strong face validity, and our single-item meritocracy measure in Study 1 aligns with best practices for measuring clearly defined constructs with single-item measures (Allen et al. 2022; Bergkvist and Rossiter 2007; Loo 2002; Matthews et al. 2022; Nagy 2002; Wanous et al. 1997). Third, in our preregistered pilot study, the meritocracy and PRS measures drawn from the archival datasets loaded onto factors consistent with their intended constructs and were strongly correlated with the 15-item Perceptions That Meritocracy Exists Scale (Son Hing et al. 2011). Study 4 further addressed this concern by including all meritocracy and PRS measures from prior studies within a single experimental design, allowing us to test whether the focal mechanism operates equivalently across measurement approaches. We therefore view the use of archival data as a worthwhile trade-off in service of testing our theoretical model in applied settings.

A third limitation concerns the 18% of Study 2 respondents who did not disclose their gender. As reported in Footnote 8, these respondents differed systematically from those who disclosed gender, reporting lower supervisory status, lower compensation, lower PRS, lower meritocracy perceptions, longer tenure, and greater URM representation. One possible explanation is that employees from marginalized groups may be less willing to disclose aspects of their identity because of concerns about identifiability or institutional trust (Goldshtein et al. 2024; Smith and Freyd 2014). If women were disproportionately represented among non-disclosers, our estimates of the Gender $\times$ Power interaction may be conservative. Future research should therefore adopt survey designs that allow for gender reporting while preserving anonymity (Jacobsen et al. 2025).

Fourth, although our theory conceptualizes PRS as an appraisal of resource sufficiency, this appraisal is unlikely to be purely objective. Employees may engage in sensemaking about why their resources are or are not sufficient, drawing on prior workplace

experiences to interpret whether their resource position reflects ordinary organizational constraints or biased treatment (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). Accordingly, women who have experienced gender bias may interpret objectively similar resource conditions as less sufficient because they view them through a bias-informed lens (Major et al. 2002; Pinel 1999), resulting in lower PRS than men facing comparable resource conditions. Although the null Gender $\times$ Condition interaction on the PRS manipulation check in Study 4 is not inconsistent with this possibility, null effects warrant cautious interpretation. This perspective does not alter our central claim that PRS is the proximal appraisal linking structural power to meritocracy perceptions. Rather, it suggests that PRS may reflect both employees' objective resource conditions and the way those conditions are interpreted. Future research could test this possibility directly by examining whether prior experiences with bias predict lower PRS at equivalent resource levels and, in turn, lower meritocracy perceptions.

Fifth, all of our studies were conducted in US-based samples, and the cultural norms surrounding meritocracy, gender, and structural power in the United States may not generalize to other cultural contexts. We propose three cultural dimensions that may shape the focal mechanism in non-US settings. First, meritocracy as an organizing ideal is more culturally salient in the United States than in many other societies. Compared to Americans, for example, Chinese individuals are more aware of nonmeritocratic predictors of organizational success such as social ties (Xian and Reynolds 2017). In cultural contexts where structural and relational factors are openly acknowledged as drivers of organizational outcomes, employees may form meritocracy perceptions less reactively to their own resource conditions, attenuating the focal PRS to meritocracy link. Second, self-serving biases are more pronounced in individualistic cultures (Bradley 1978; Zuckerman 1979) than in collectivistic ones (Chiu 1990; Kashima and Triandis 1986). Thus, well-resourced employees in individualistic cultures may be more likely to attribute their success to merit and view their organizations as meritocratic, whereas employees in collectivistic contexts may more readily attribute outcomes to relational or structural factors, attenuating the documented relationship. Third, the gendered conditions of structural power are themselves culturally variable. Cultures with stronger gendered expectations about leadership may produce sharper PRS asymmetries between high-power men and women, whereas more egalitarian cultural contexts may attenuate them. Future research should examine whether the focal Gender $\times$ Structural Power effect on PRS is more pronounced in cultures with greater gender inequality at senior levels, and whether the PRS to meritocracy pathway operates more strongly in cultural contexts where meritocracy is salient as an organizing ideal and self-serving biases are amplified.

12 | Conclusion

Although prior work has largely found that the psychological experience of power is similar for men and women alike, our work suggests an important distinction. In field settings, powerful women may lack the resources available to powerful men, making women more likely to recognize how meritocracy ideals fall short in their organizations. Given evidence that those who

perceive their organizations as meritocratic are less supportive of corrective reform (Castilla and Benard 2010; Major 1994; McCoy and Major 2007), our findings shed new light on which organizational actors are especially likely to perpetuate inequitable practices and why.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in OSF at <https://tinyurl.com/powergendermerit>. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, (<https://www.opm.gov/fevs/>)-Merit Principles Survey, <https://www.mspb.gov/foia/SurveyData.htm>.

Endnotes

- ¹ In most formal organizational hierarchies, individuals who are highly ranked and highly compensated tend to possess both power (i.e., control over valuable resources) and status (i.e., being respected; Fragale et al. 2012; Tost 2015; Weber 2009; Magee and Galinsky 2008), and these constructs are empirically correlated (Bales et al. 1951). However, research finds that when individuals hold both high power and high status, the effects of power tend to override those of status (Blader and Chen 2012), suggesting that power may be the more dominant predictor in shaping social judgments when both are present.
- ² Although it is plausible that women, overall, may report lower PRS than men for certain types of resources (e.g., Bailyn 2003; Madden 2012), our theorizing concerns not the average level of PRS for women relative to men, but the rate at which the resources accompanying structural power accrue to each (e.g., Lee and Kray 2021). We therefore conceptualize gender as a moderator of the power-PRS relationship rather than as an antecedent to PRS.
- ³ Results are consistent in the expected direction whether structural power is measured as rank or compensation alone. For PRS, the Gender $\times$ Rank interaction was significant with and without controls ($b = -0.06$ and $b = -0.07$, respectively, $ps < 0.001$), as was the Gender $\times$ Compensation interaction ($b = -0.12$ and $b = -0.14$, $ps < 0.001$). For meritocracy perceptions, the Gender $\times$ Rank interaction was significant with controls ($b = -0.02$, $p = 0.030$) and marginal without controls ($b = -0.02$, $p = 0.093$), and the Gender $\times$ Compensation interaction was significant both with and without controls ($b = -0.02$, $p = 0.037$ and $p = 0.043$).
- ⁴ Given Study 1 employs a single-item measure of meritocracy perceptions, it limits our ability to conduct factor analysis to assess

discriminant validity between meritocracy perceptions and PRS, as single items cannot be modeled as latent constructs (Bollen 1989). Nevertheless, these two constructs were moderately correlated ($r=0.41$, $p<0.001$), suggesting they are empirically related but not redundant. Prior research recommends that correlations well below unity (e.g., <0.80) provide evidence of discriminant validity in applied settings (Bagozzi et al. 1991).

⁵ To address the possibility that women are concentrated in agencies with fewer resources, we reran the Model 4 interactions for meritocracy perceptions and PRS, replacing the random intercept for agency with agency-level fixed effects. The Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction remained significant for both meritocracy perceptions, $b=-0.05$, $t(64222)=-4.13$, $p<0.001$, and PRS, $b=-0.13$, $t(66626)=-12.96$, $p<0.001$, indicating that the gendered patterns are unlikely to reflect women's concentration in lower-resourced agencies.

⁶ We acknowledge that our cross-sectional, archival data limit causal inference, and we emphasize that our mediation tests are statistical in nature and do not confirm directionality. To probe the robustness of our variable ordering, we tested three alternative arrangements (full results in the Supplement). First, a reverse mediation model treating meritocracy perceptions as the mediator and PRS as the outcome yielded a significant but substantially smaller index of moderated mediation than our focal model ($b=-0.02$ vs. -0.07), and the direct interaction remained significant ($p<0.001$) rather than dropping to nonsignificance as in our focal model. This direction is also less conceptually plausible: feeling under-resourced is theorized to constrain influence and undermine trust in organizational fairness (Eisenberger et al. 1997; Kanter 1977; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002), whereas it is less clear why perceiving low meritocracy would make one feel personally under-resourced. Second, an arrangement with gender as the predictor and structural power as the moderator was statistically equivalent to our focal model but less theoretically appropriate, because prior work positions structural power as an antecedent of system-justifying organizational perceptions (Kennedy and Anderson 2017; To et al. 2024), rather than as a contextual moderator of gender's effects. Third, an arrangement with PRS as the predictor and structural power as the mediator yielded an index of moderated mediation less than half the magnitude of our focal model ($b=-0.03$ vs. -0.07), indicating that the consequences of occupying structural power, rather than resource access as a pathway to power, more proximally account for the gendered gap in meritocracy perceptions.

⁷ To account for the possibility that general job satisfaction explains these associations, we reran the key interaction models controlling for job satisfaction, measured with a single item ("Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?") rated on a 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*) scale. The Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction remained significant for both PRS, $b=-0.12$, $t(66660)=-14.61$, $p<0.001$, and meritocracy perceptions, $b=-0.05$, $t(64256)=-4.53$, $p<0.001$.

⁸ Comparisons between respondents who disclosed gender ($n=27\,284$) and those who did not ($n=5855$) revealed significant differences on key study variables. Those who did not disclose gender had lower supervisory status ($M=1.78$ vs. $M=1.96$), $t(2765)=6.91$, $p<0.001$, lower meritocracy perceptions ($M=3.35$ vs. $M=3.60$), $t(4939)=14.53$, $p<0.001$, lower PRS ($M=3.64$ vs. $M=3.80$), $t(8234)=10.10$, $p<0.001$, lower compensation ($M=2.54$ vs. $M=2.60$), $t(2403)=2.72$, $p=0.007$, greater tenure ($M=15.93$ vs. $M=15.34$), $t(2580)=3.07$, $p=0.002$, and were more likely to identify as URM (46% vs. 35%), $\chi^2(1)=71.84$, $p<0.001$. The theoretical and design implications of this pattern are discussed in the Limitations section.

⁹ We note that while some items address procedural fairness, these elements are constitutive of meritocracy as an organizational system: fair competition, protection from arbitrary action, and selection based on qualifications are the mechanisms through which merit-based advancement is either upheld or undermined (e.g., Castilla and Benard 2010; Son Hing et al. 2011). Even so, upon removing the items pertaining to

fairness ("My organization recruits a diverse pool of applicants for job vacancies," "My organization protects employees against arbitrary action," and "My organization holds fair and open competition for job vacancies"; $\alpha=0.85$), the Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction remained significant without controls, $b=-0.06$, $t(24191)=-4.62$, $p<0.001$, and with controls, $b=-0.06$, $t(23030)=-4.29$, $p<0.001$.

¹⁰ To address the possibility that women are concentrated in agencies with fewer resources, we reran the Model 4 interactions for meritocracy perceptions and PRS, replacing the random intercept for agency with agency-level fixed effects. The Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction remained significant for both PRS, $b=-0.09$, $t(25792)=-6.09$, $p<0.001$, and meritocracy perceptions, $b=-0.06$, $t(20495)=-4.12$, $p<0.001$, indicating that the gendered patterns are unlikely to reflect women's concentration in lower-resourced agencies.

¹¹ We tested three alternative arrangements of our focal variables using Model 8 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2022) and report each in the supplement (see Supplement pp. 9–10). Across all three alternatives, our original model was favored, producing the largest index of moderated mediation and the only arrangement consistent with full moderated mediation, as the direct interaction between structural power and gender on meritocracy perceptions became nonsignificant only when PRS was included as the mediator.

¹² We additionally conducted a systematic comparison of candidate mediators by analyzing each of the other 15 engagement items in the survey. PRS produced the largest Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction of any item and ranked second on the index of moderated mediation ($a_3 \times b = -0.040$) (see Table S4, pp. 10–12).

¹³ To examine whether Study 2's patterns generalize across waves of the Merit Principles Survey, we sought to replicate Study 2's results in the 2016 wave, which is the next most recent publicly available wave of the Merit Principles Survey (see Supplemental Study 3). The 2016 wave contained a similar PRS measure but no broad meritocracy measure; the closest analog asked whether respondents had been personally treated fairly across organizational domains. The Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction on PRS replicated (H1), as did the associations between the meritocracy analog and career investment (H4a) and withdrawal intentions (H4b). The Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction on the meritocracy analog reversed, which we interpret as a measurement-level boundary condition (personally experienced fair treatment vs. organizational adherence to merit principles) consistent with the denial of personal discrimination effect (Crosby 1984). The 2016 wave also contained three items mapping onto the instrumental, material, and sponsorship strands of our PRS definition; a composite of these items ($\alpha=0.78$) yielded the same Gender $\times$ Structural Power interaction in the predicted direction, providing convergent evidence with a broader operationalization of PRS.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Table S1:** Gender×Structural Power interactions predicting perceived resource sufficiency and meritocracy perceptions, with "do not know" responses recoded to the scale midpoint (Study 1). **Table S2:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting Talent Management meritocracy subscale ($\alpha = 0.94$). **Table S3:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting perceptions of meritocracy after recoding d ("do not know") to 3 (instead of dropping from analysis). **Table S4:** Engagement Item Horse Race: Gender×Structural Power Interactions and Indices of Moderated Mediation on Meritocracy Perceptions ($N = 24160$). **Table S5:** Representative elaborations from the comparative judgment task, by explanation category (Study 3; Stage 3 responses). **Figure S1:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2006 subsample). **Figure S2:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (2006 subsample). **Table S6:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2006 subsample). **Table S7:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2006 subsample). **Figure S3:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2010 subsample). **Figure S4:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (2010 subsample). **Table S8:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2010 subsample). **Table S9:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2010 subsample). **Figure S5:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2011 subsample). **Table S10:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2011 subsample). **Table S11:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2011 subsample). **Figure S6:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2012 subsample). **Table S12:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2012 subsample). **Table S13:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2012 subsample). **Figure S7:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2013 subsample). **Figure S8:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (2013 subsample). **Table S14:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2013 subsample). **Table S15:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2013 subsample). **Figure S9:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2014 subsample). **Figure S10:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (2014 subsample). **Table S16:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2014 subsample). **Table S17:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2014 subsample). **Figure S11:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2015 subsample). **Figure S12:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (2015 subsample). **Table S18:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2015 subsample). **Table S19:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2015 subsample).

Figure S13: Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2016 subsample). **Figure S14:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (2016 subsample). **Table S20:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2016 subsample). **Table S21:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2016 subsample). **Figure S15:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2017 subsample). **Figure S16:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (2017 subsample). **Table S22:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2017 subsample). **Table S23:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2017 subsample). **Figure S17:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2018 subsample). **Figure S18:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (2018 subsample). **Table S24:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2018 subsample). **Table S25:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2018 subsample). **Figure S19:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting PRS (2019 subsample). **Figure S20:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting meritocracy perceptions (2019 subsample). **Table S26:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting PRS (2019 subsample). **Table S27:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (2019 subsample). **Table S28:** Means, standard deviations, and correlations with confidence intervals (Supplemental Study 2). **Table S29:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting meritocracy perceptions (Supplemental Study 2). **Figure S21:** Gender×Structural Power on meritocracy perceptions (Supplemental Study 2). **Figure S22:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting single-item PRS measure (Supplemental Study 3). **Table S30:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting single-item PRS measure (Supplemental Study 3). **Figure S23:** Gender×Structural Power on predicting fair treatment (Supplemental Study 3). **Table S31:** Effect of gender, structural power, interaction, and controls in predicting fair treatment (Supplemental Study 3).