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FlashReport

Power gets the job: Priming power improves interview outcomes

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Priming participants with feelings of power improves professional interview outcomes.
- ▶ In two studies, participants wrote application letters and attended 15-minute job interviews.
- ▶ In both studies, unaware judges significantly preferred the power-primed applicants.

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ABSTRACT

The current research explores whether momentary changes in power can shift professional interview outcomes. Two experiments manipulated power by asking applicants to recall a time they had or lacked power prior to writing a job application letter (Experiment 1) or being interviewed for admission to business schools (Experiment 2). Independent judges, who were unaware of the applicants' experimental condition or even the existence of the power manipulation, significantly preferred the written and face-to-face interview performance of powerful applicants to that of powerless (Experiments 1 and 2) or power-neutral applicants (Experiment 2). In addition, the judges' preference for power-primed applicants was mediated by perceptions of the applicant's persuasiveness. Overall, merely asking participants to remember a personal experience with power dramatically affected the impressions that interviewers had of them. Our findings illustrate power's far-reaching effects and have potentially important implications for understanding the psychology of job interviews.

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Introduction

Have successful professionals always been successful? Take Francesca Gino. An Associate Professor at Harvard, she is considered by many to be a superstar. But things did not always look so bright for her: two years in a row she gave job talks at a number of top 10 schools and universities, but got no offers from those schools. Yet, in 2009, everything suddenly turned up roses; she got offers from Harvard, Wharton, Berkeley, and New York University. What had changed? Well, clearly she was older and wiser. But she also changed her pre-talk ritual: before each campus talk and interview she sat down and wrote out a reflection of a time in which she had power.¹

This example raises the possibility that merely recalling a time in which one had power—a solitary, anonymous, internal task—can transform people in the eyes of others and even change professional interview outcomes. Inspired by Gino's example, we experimentally

tested whether priming power increases success in the job application process, from writing an application letter to being interviewed, even when interviewers are unaware of the power manipulation given to applicants.

Our reasoning starts with the premise that powerlessness is central to job applicants' experience: they desire a job but depend on interviewers to get a position (Jones & Pinkney, 1989). This position undermines applicants' sense of control and results in a sense of insecurity that can ultimately hurt their performance in the job-interview setting (Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991). Consequently, making applicants feel more powerful might improve their performance by addressing their underlying feelings of lack of control and lack of confidence that are endemic to the powerless position of being an interviewee.

Several streams of research support this premise. For instance, merely asking participants to write a few lines about a time in which they had power increases their feeling of control (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009). In addition, episodic power primes foster optimism (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) and confidence (Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007; Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2011).

We propose that these power-induced feelings of control, optimism, and confidence will directly improve performance in job application

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tasks. First, although untested, it is likely that this increase in feelings of power will lead to a more confident, commanding, and self-assured communication style. Such a communication style is valuable in an interview (Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Sparks, Areni, & Cox, 1998). Furthermore, feeling powerful leads to more dominant non-verbal behavior (Carney, Hall, & Smith LeBeau, 2005; Hall, Coats, & Smith LeBeau, 2005), a plus when applying for a job (Imada & Hakel, 1977; Young & Beier, 1977). Second, feelings of power can increase feelings of competence, relative to states of powerlessness (Dubois, 2011). Given that competence is of prime importance in interview settings, a state of high power might improve the likelihood that interviewers judge him or her positively. Finally, feelings of power can decrease cortisol, a stress hormone (Carney et al., 2013). If power decreases hormonal evidence of stress, it should also lead to less expressions of stress that can derail an interview (Rynes et al., 1991).

In sum, because feelings of power increase expressed confidence and competence, and decrease stress, we propose that giving applicants a sense of power will increase their likelihood of success in an interview. We conducted two experiments testing whether recalling a personal experience with power allows applicants to make a more positive impression on interviewers and increase their chances of being selected in written (Experiment 1) and face-to-face contexts (Experiment 2), even when interviewers are unaware of that manipulation of power.

Experiment 1: written application letter

Method

Participants and design

One hundred and seventy-seven Dutch students (142 women, 35 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 20$ years) were randomly assigned to the role of applicant or interviewer in same-sex dyads. Data from 11 participants who were erroneously not assigned to same-sex dyads were not included. Applicants were randomly assigned to receive a low-power or high-power prime. Interviewers did not receive a prime.

Applicants

Applicants were first asked to write about an experience in which they either had power or lacked power (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). This was presented as a warm-up task that helped participants become familiar with writing about themselves.

Next, applicants were given an actual job ad for a function of "Sales analyst at Corporate Clients & Solutions" taken from a national newspaper. This was presented to participants as a completely separate and independent task. Applicants were then asked to assume that they possessed relevant education and job experience and to write an application letter for this position. Next, they were instructed to put the letter in a closed envelope and hand it to a lab-assistant. Finally, applicants also completed a six-item power manipulation check on the amount of power they experienced in the situation described in their essay (powerful, influential, important; and dependent, powerless, subordinate [reverse coded], all on 9-point scales, $\alpha = .90$, one participant failed to enter the manipulation check).

Interviewers

Lab-assistants handed the applicant's letter to a randomly assigned interviewer who had been matched on gender. It was ensured that applicants and interviewers would remain anonymous. Importantly, interviewers were blind to experimental condition and the existence of the power manipulation. Interviewers were instructed to carefully read the letter, form an impression of the applicant and indicate how likely they would be to offer the job to the candidate, on a 9-point scale (see Supplementary data).

Results

Manipulation checks

Power-primed applicants felt more powerful ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 1.68$) in their recalled experiences than low-power-primed applicants ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.13$), $F(1, 80) = 41.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .34$.

Applicant outcome

Interviewers were more likely to offer the job to power-primed applicants ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.96$) than to powerlessness-primed applicants ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.67$), $F(1, 81) = 4.28$, $p = .042$, $\eta^2_p = .05$, $d = 0.454$. Thinking about an experience of power increased the tendency for interviewers to offer an applicant a job.

Content and style of letters

Two blind raters coded the essays for expressed self-confidence (7-point scale, interrater $r = .25$, $p = .02$). Essays written by high-power participants were rated as expressing more self-confidence ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 0.81$) than those written by low-power participants ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 0.99$), $F(1, 81) = 3.94$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2_p = .05$, $d = 0.43$ (see Supplementary data).

We also digitalized all letters and analyzed them using LIWC. Given that power has been linked to disinhibition (Galinsky et al., 2003; Hirsh, Galinsky, Zhong, 2011; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), we investigated whether any observed effect occurred because high-power primed applicants simply wrote longer letters. Letters did not differ between conditions in total number of word ($p = .77$) or sentences ($p = .49$). In addition, letters did not differ in usage of six-or-more letter words ($p = .19$), first-person singular personal pronouns ($p = .55$), tense (past, present, future) (p 's $> .70$), frequency of negations ($p = .52$), or the expression of positive ($p = .42$) and negative ($p = .17$) emotions.

Overall, briefly asking participants to first write about an experience of power led them to write application letters that were significantly more likely to yield to a job offer compared to participants who wrote about an experience of powerlessness.

Experiment 2: selection interview with experienced interviewers

Experiment 2 aimed to extend the findings of Experiment 1 to a face-to-face interview context. We also tested whether power made participants more successful because judges saw them as more persuasive. Finally, we added a baseline condition to determine whether the effects of the power primes stem from power, powerlessness, or both.

In this study, French undergraduates underwent a 15-minute mock interview for entrance to business schools. During their selection interview, interviewees have to convince two expert interviewers (typically professors) to be accepted by the school. To be admitted, the candidate needs to persuade the interviewers that he or she has the motivation, skills, and experience to be successful in the business school. Because mock-interviews are an important part of candidates' preparation to the exam for entrance to business schools, students are highly involved and motivated to do well. Before interviewers started their mock interview, they first received the same low-power or high-power prime as used in Experiment 1, or no prime (baseline).

Method

Participants and design

Participants were 55 French undergraduates ($M_{\text{age}} = 20$ years) who underwent a 15-minute mock interview for entrance to business schools. Prior to the interview, participants completed a pre-interview questionnaire that ended with a test that supposedly assessed handwriting. No link was made with the interview and we ensured that the task was seen as purely incidental. In reality, however, this was the same power prime as used in Experiment 1. Depending on

experimental condition, participants wrote about an experience of power or powerlessness (Galinsky et al., 2003). Baseline participants did not complete any prime.

Interviewers were blind to condition and to the existence of the manipulation. After each interview, interviewers reported whether they would admit the applicant, on a single dichotomous item (Yes/No). In addition, interviewers assessed the applicants' persuasiveness on two items (how convincing and how persuasive the applicant was) that were averaged in a persuasiveness index ($r = .92$; 9-point scales).

Results

Power affected admission rates, $\chi^2(2) = 6.76, p = .03$. In the baseline condition, interviewers accepted 47.1% of candidates. In the high-power condition, this rate rose to 68.4%, while in the low-power condition it fell to 26.3%. Stated differently, power increased the odds of acceptance by 81% compared to baseline and by 162% compared to low-power.

The power manipulation also affected the persuasiveness of the applicants, $F(2, 52) = 11.44, p < .0001$. Compared to baseline applicants ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.29$), high-power applicants ($M = 5.66, SD = 1.61$) were seen as more persuasive and low-power applicants as less persuasive ($M = 3.58, SD = 1.07$), both p 's $< .05$.

To test whether the differences in interviewees' acceptance rate was mediated by perceived persuasiveness, power was coded linearly, with low power = -1 , baseline = 0 and high power = 1 . A simultaneous logistic regression model (MacKinnon et al., 1991) revealed that persuasiveness significantly predicted acceptance, $B = 1.75, SE = .50, p < .001$, while the effect of power became non-significant (from: $B = .90, SE = .36, p = .01$; to $B = -.27, SE = .53, p = .61$). Furthermore, we formally tested whether the indirect effect (i.e., the path through the mediator) was significant using bootstrapping procedures (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). The indirect effect involving dependence on others was significant (95% CI = 0.356 to 2.919), indicating successful mediation through this path.

General discussion

Merely asking applicants to remember a personal experience of power significantly increased their success in simulated interviews for job and academic admissions. These effects were found both in written applications and in a 15-minute face-to-face interview where experts served as interviewers. Importantly, these effects occurred even though evaluators/interviewers were unaware of the power manipulation.

Theoretical implications

These results are the first to our knowledge to show the transformative effect of power primes in interpersonal professional contexts. The psychological experience of power not only has intrapersonal effects but also has interpersonal consequences, affecting how others evaluate that person primed with power. These results make a significant contribution to the power literature by priming power in one group of individuals but exploring the consequences on the judgments of a different group of judges, ones blind to the existence of the power primes. Power has historically been conceived of as a structural variable (Ng, 1980) and a property of social relationships (Emerson, 1962), but the past decade has focused on power as a psychological property of the individual. We bring the focus of power back to the interpersonal level by showing how priming power in one person affects the social perception of another person.

There are two main types of skills that are typically assessed in interview contexts: hard skills (e.g., mastery over a specific technique or an administrative procedure) and soft skills, which refer to how people relate to others and leverage their know-how in social contexts (e.g., engaging in a dialog). The current effect suggests a direct link between power and soft skills, by changing how participants are perceived

in an interpersonal context. This is consistent with a large literature showcasing how those who rise to leadership often outperform others in soft skills (Nye, 2004).

Practical implications and limitations

The current findings have potentially important practical implications. Like Francesca Gino, applicants may be able to boost their career prospects by engaging in a pre-interview process of recalling a time in which they had power. The current research thus seems to offer hope to millions of job and school applicants around the world – tap into your inner sense of confidence by recalling an experience with power.

One limitation that deserves attention is the incidental nature of the power primes. In contrast to our opening scenario in which Francesca Gino purposely used a power prime to boost her delivery, our studies deliberately obscured the purpose of the prime. One possibility is that if applicants are made aware of the power manipulation's purpose, they might correct for the fact that their current feelings of power are due to the priming task (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). In fact, consciousness of primes can sometimes even produce contrast effects (Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1987; Strack, Schwarz, Bless, Kübler, & Wänke, 1993). However, every one of these examples has involved semantic primes, in which people are exposed to words prior to making a social judgment. Awareness of semantic primes can lead to contrast because they make participants aware that they are exposed to some external source of information that requires correcting. None of these studies has shown contrast effects using episodic primes that invoke a particular mindset. These episodic primes require participants to consciously self-generate a particular experience. Consciousness of these episodic primes and how one could use these strategically may not produce contrast effects. After all, participants are not exposed to some external information that they need to correct for – all information comes from within the person (Mussweiler & Neumann, 2000). Pending further research, we therefore suggest that consciously using the power prime may produce the type of positive outcomes that Francesca Gino achieved.

Yet, there are other situations in which completing a power prime could backfire. In recalling experiences of power, if people struggle to find a convincing example when they were powerful, this difficulty in recalling an experience with power might undermine their feelings of power, producing worse outcomes than if they had not been asked to recall an experience with power. The difficulty in recalling a powerful experience communicates that one is truly not powerful (Mussweiler, 2003). Overall, we propose the power primes can help applicants in job interview settings – provided they have at least some experiences with having power and can easily access those experiences.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.02.008>.

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