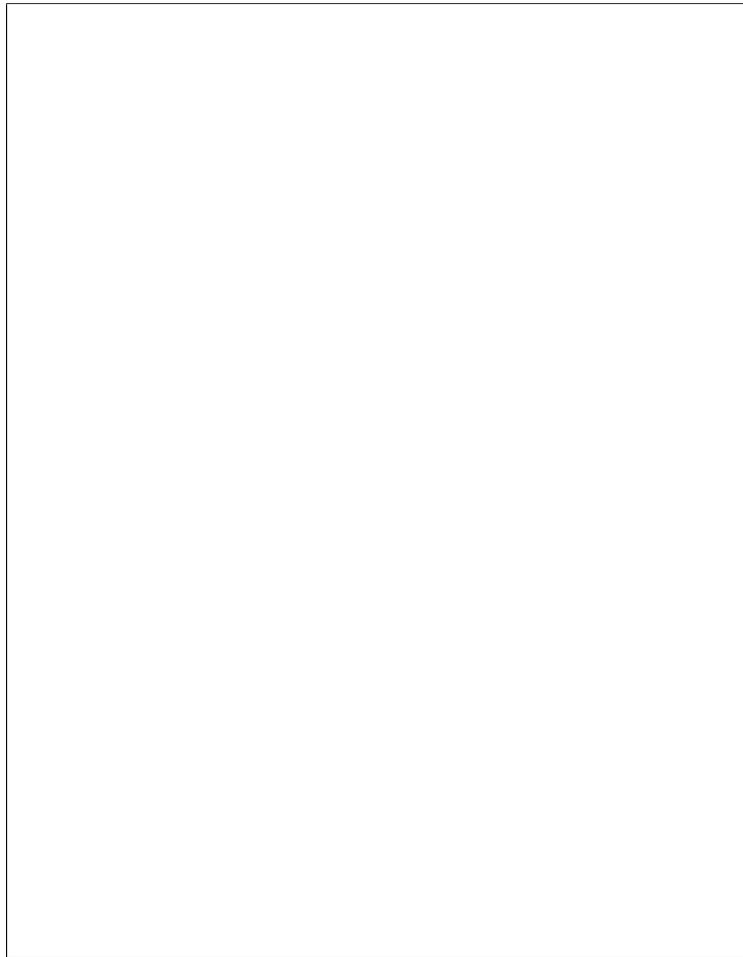


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Power and morality

Joris Lammers¹, Adam D Galinsky², David Dubois³ and Derek D Rucker⁴

This review synthesizes research on power and morality. Although power is typically viewed as undermining the roots of moral behavior, this paper proposes power can either morally corrupt or morally elevate individuals depending on two crucial factors. First, power can trigger behavioral disinhibition. As a consequence, power fosters corruption by disinhibiting people's immoral desires, but can also encourage ethical behavior by amplifying moral impulses. Second, power leads people to focus more on their self, relative to others. Thus, those with power are more likely to engage in self-beneficial behavior, but those who lack power are more prone to engage in other-beneficial unethical behavior. Overall, we offer predictions as to when and why power will yield more or less moral behavior.

Addresses

¹ University of Cologne, Germany

² Columbia University, United States

³ INSEAD, France

⁴ Northwestern University, United States

Corresponding author: Lammers, Joris (joris.lammers@uni-koeln.de)

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The idea that power has a corruptive effect has saturated contemporary consciousness to the point of becoming cliché. Indeed, the classic definition of power can be used to infer implications for morality. Power is commonly defined as having asymmetric control over valued resources in a social relationship [1]. As such, if one has control over resources, one is less dependent on others; this lack of dependency means the powerful have reduced pressure to abide by social norms or perform 'good' behaviors. Following a common definition of morality as a normative code of conduct put forward by society, groups, or individuals [2], it makes logical sense that power will cause immoral behavior because the powerful are free of dependency.

In recent years, a large body of research has demonstrated that power has deep transformative effects on human

psychology. People who feel powerful think and act fundamentally differently than people who feel less powerful [3]. With respect to morality, the link between power and morality cannot be satisfactorily captured by a simple main effect where power corrupts. To help the reader understand the complexities between power and morality we consider two of the most important transformative effects of power — behavioral disinhibition and heightened self-focus. These two factors determine whether power produces a corrupting or morally elevating effect. See [Figure 1](#) for our conceptual model.

Behavioral disinhibition

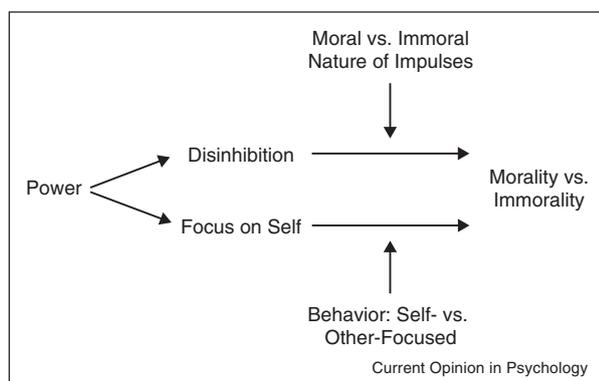
A sense of feeling powerful leads to behavioral disinhibition [4,5]. Power is disinhibiting, at least in part, because it activates the Behavioral Approach System, a dopaminergically driven brain pathway that increases reward pursuit [4]. As a result of this activation, power increases the likelihood that people will engage in action to satisfy their current needs. For example, the powerful are more likely to turn off an annoying fan blowing in their face [6]. Research has demonstrated the power-disinhibition link at multiple levels of analysis, ranging from studies showing that manipulations of power affect neural processes [7] to findings that stable power positions in existing hierarchies influence feelings of disinhibition [8].

Disinhibition and immoral behavior

The disinhibiting effect of power can lead people to act immorally. For example, the powerful are more likely to betray their romantic partner and commit adultery [9,10,11]. Drivers of more expensive cars, typically owned by high-power individuals, engage in greater traffic violations [12, but see 11]. In fact, even situational and environmental factors associated with power, such as taking an expansive pose [13], can increase the likelihood that people steal, cheat, or break other norms [14]. Behavioral disinhibition provides one clear explanation for these effects. Most people feel inhibited to cheat even when they have the desire to [15,16], but people who experience a sense of power overcome these inhibitions. Another reason why the power-induced disinhibition effect increases immoral behavior stems from its tendency to reduce the stress, guilt, and/or arousal that people feel when contemplating behaving immorally. The powerful are better liars because they don't experience the same cortisol rush that people normally experience when lying [17] and thus do not leak out the anxiety that exposes liars.

One might think the immoral actions of the powerful mean they hold looser moral standards. Yet, the powerful

Figure 1



Power affects morality through disinhibition and an increased focus on the self. These effects depend on the moral (versus immoral) nature of impulses and whether the behavior is self-focused or other-focused.

actually express *stricter* morality in some circumstances, and this behavior can also be understood via disinhibition. When people witness someone act unethically, they want to express disapproval, but they are often inhibited in their expressions to avoid disrupting social interaction and connections. Power helps people overcome these reservations and judge others more strictly and more harshly [18]. Due to these twin outcomes of disinhibition — increasing immoral behavior while also increasing condemnation of others' immoral acts — power can also lead people to show hypocrisy. That is, power leads people to judge others for making the same transgressions that they are guilty of themselves [19^{••}]. The powerful preach morality but in bad faith.

Disinhibition and moral behavior

Despite these morally corruptive effects of power via disinhibition, the disinhibiting effect of power can lead people to act morally. How is this converse finding possible? First, the disinhibiting nature of power can produce an increase in the correspondence between people's current situation-induced tendencies or intentions and their actual behaviors [20^{••}, see also 21, 22]. As a consequence, when a situation prompts people to consider behaving in a moral manner, power can reinforce people's orientation and foster greater morality. When a situation demands moral behavior, power holds the potential to facilitate such behavior. For example, commons and public-goods dilemmas are both allocation games that pit individual motives against collective interests by increasing the relative salience of each motive. Disinhibition leads people to take from the collective in the commons dilemma, but it leads people to give resources to the collective in the public-goods dilemma. Power therefore increases selfishness in the former, but increases altruism in the latter case [6].

In addition, because power reveals and validates people's innate tendencies, it can lead to more moral (or immoral) behavior depending on people's personal inclinations [20^{••},22]. For instance, power can lead to amoral and selfish behavior among people with a weak moral identity, but can lead to altruistic behavior among people with a strong moral identity [23]. As another example, power increases socially responsible behavior among people with a communal orientation, but has the opposite effect among those with an exchange orientation [24]. Similarly, power leads men to see women in sexualized terms, but only if they have a predisposition toward sexual harassment [25] or have been exposed to sex-related cues [26].

Finally, power-induced disinhibition can shape the moral decisions that people make. A common distinction in moral psychology is between utilitarian decisions, which determine the right thing to do by emphasizing options that promote the greatest good, and deontological decisions, which follow moral rules to yield to what is right. The relation between power and utilitarian versus deontological thinking is complex. People are sometimes held from making a utilitarian response because they feel inhibited by a moral code. In these cases, power can promote more utilitarian choices by making people more disinhibited; power allows people to calculate the trade-off between outcomes and moral principles without feeling the stress of this compromise [27,28]. In other cases, people may prefer to stick to the rules, but feel social pressure from others to deviate from the rules. In these cases, a power-induced self-focus might help people overcome social pressure and stick with a deontological decision [18,19^{••}]. In summary, by increasing disinhibition, power can both increase and decrease morality. An overview of these effects is shown in the left column in Table 1.

Focus on self

A second major process by which power affects thought and behavior is that it leads people to adopt a greater focus on the self and one's own needs and goals [29,30]. This power induced self-focus can lead people to perceive themselves as having greater value to society than others [31], creates a sense of social distance from other people [32,33], and reduces their ability to take other people's perspectives [34]. Such an orientation to focus on the self can also affect the morality of the powerful, in two opposite directions, as delineated next.

Self-focus and immoral behavior

The self-focus of the powerful can undermine morality by leading people to be more focused on their own needs. For example, in a food tasting study, power-primed participants who felt hungry took more of a limited number of cheese crackers, thus leaving fewer crackers for the other participants [35]. In addition, increased self-focus leads the powerful to spend more on their own

Table 1

Framework of the dual effects of power on morality, due to disinhibition and an increased focus on the self.

	Disinhibition	Focus on self
Decrease morality	Disinhibit immoral impulses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater indulgence of immoral desires • More stealing, cheating, lying and norm violations, etc. for the self • Increased hypocrisy: preaching while sinning 	Reduced adherence to societal moral norms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced empathy and compassion • Increased selfishness and stinginess • More objectification, dehumanization
Increase morality	Disinhibit moral impulses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced reaction to moral cues in the situation • Abide by chronic moral inclinations • Strict moralizing • Greater likelihood to make liberal utilitarian choices 	Reduced influence of other-focused immorality: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less other-beneficial unethical behavior • Reduced conformity to unethical groups • Less likely to follow immoral others

needs and less on others' [29]. More seriously, perhaps, power can also decrease empathy and compassion, making the powerful less concerned with others' suffering [36,37]. This focus on the self can even lead people to objectify others, seeing others through an instrumental lens, and treating them as tools that can be used in the pursuit of their own goals [26]. This power-induced objectification can take the powerful down a path of dehumanizing others [38,39].

Self-focus and moral behavior

Power-induced self-focus can also produce moral behaviors. For example, when it comes to unethical acts that would benefit others, those who are powerful actually are less likely to cheat, steal, or deceive compared to relatively powerless individuals [40**]. For instance, in one experiment participants reported their willingness to engage in unethical behavior that would benefit either themselves or others. Relative to powerless individuals, powerful individuals reported being more likely to engage in unethical behavior that benefited the self, but *less* likely to engage in unethical behavior that benefited others [40**]. This study demonstrates the key distinction between selfishness and immorality. Put simply, while feeling powerful increases selfishness, it does not unilaterally increase immorality.

A second reason why self-focus may help the powerful to act more morally is that the power-induced self-focus can protect people from conformity pressure. People typically feel pressure to follow others, even if they do not agree with others' opinions or behaviors. As a consequence of conformity, people in a group can engage in immoral behavior even when almost every group member privately disagrees [41]. Yet, by creating a self-oriented focus, power can help individuals to overcome negative conformity pressures and express their true opinions [42]. For example, in one experiment, participants first completed a tedious and boring task and were then asked to provide feedback on the task by adding their comments to a sheet that contained remarks by prior participants. In reality, the remarks were scripted by the experimenters and described the task in an overly positive manner.

High-power participants were more likely to ignore the previous feedback and provide their true, critical feedback. In other words, the powerful were less likely to misrepresent the task to subsequent participants [42]. In summary, by increasing self-focus, power can both increase and decrease morality. An overview of these effects is shown in Table 1 (right column).

Overcoming the corruptive effects of power

Given that power can sometimes corrupt — through disinhibition and/or self-focus — considerable research has aimed to answer the question of how the corrupting effects of power can be overcome. As one approach, past work has investigated whether reducing or altering the experience of power changes the course of its downstream effects. For example, making the powerful feel that their position is illegitimate and unfair can limit the psychological effects of power [43]. For example, where power produces hypocrisy by leading people to violate norms that they simultaneously penalize others for, this effect of power is effectively prevented when the powerful feel that their position is illegitimate [19**]. This approach must be taken with caution, however, as making the powerful feel insecure in their power can also heighten the destructive effects of power. Making the powerful feel incompetent, for instance, threatens their ego and can lead to aggressive behavior [44]. Similarly, powerful individuals who feel that the position they hold lacks status, treat their subordinates in a more demeaning manner [45]. Finally, making the powerful feel that their position in the hierarchy is unstable leads them to prioritize their own goals over those of others, especially if they are high in dominance motivation [46].

Together, these examples suggest that limiting the nefarious effects of power by weakening the experience of power can be difficult to implement in practice. Furthermore, limiting the experience of power also reduces many of the positive effects of power, such as making people feel more optimistic [47], see the bigger picture [48,49], and be more forceful in their actions and pursuit of goals [6,50].

An alternative, and potentially more fruitful idea, is to attack the self-oriented nature of power. Take the analogy of a car. A car requires gas to accelerate down the road; otherwise it stands still. In this analogy, the disinhibiting effect of power acts as a psychological gas pedal. But a car also needs a steering wheel or it will inevitably crash into obstacles. The self-oriented nature of power takes away an individual's steering wheel. To counterbalance this effect, one needs to give the powerful a steering wheel — for instance, perspective-taking that can help yield better decisions [51]. Combining power with perspective-taking might lead people to be more disinhibited and action-oriented while simultaneously remaining focused on the interests of others. This combination can lead to more pro-active, pro-social behavior: acceleration-while-steering [52**]. For example, participants in one study were instructed to describe how they would lay off a fictional employee. In this situation, power can have the positive effect of making people better able to articulate why the decision was made, or a negative effect of increased insensitivity to the feelings of others. This study found that combining power and perspective-taking led decision-makers to write the most procedurally just letters that were candid and provided details and explanations in a respectful and sensitive manner [52**]. Other research has found that making the powerful accountable by making them explain their decision-making process leads them to focus on others and act in a less self-serving manner [53]. Given the nature of these findings, future research would benefit from determining whether combining power and perspective taking can also reduce other harmful effects of power.

Conclusion

Our review strongly advocates abandoning the idea that the effect of power is inherently and solely bound to corruption. We have proposed that power has transformative effects through at least two processes: disinhibition and self-focus. We illustrate this idea in Figure 1. By integrating these two processes, our perspective offers a comprehensive yet parsimonious understanding of when power corrupts and when it fosters moral behavior. By linking one of the most basic variables that underlies social structure — power — to one of the most basic distinctions in social behavior — morality — our perspective helps move toward an integrated theory of social life.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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