



Power and retributive justice: How trait information influences the fairness of punishment among power holders



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Four studies tested the effects of power on retributive justice judgments.
- High power people are more punitive towards offenders with evil character traits.
- These effects emerge only if the power position was acquired legitimately.
- When no trait information was given, the effects of power were mediated by appraisal ratings.
- Power holders base punitive judgments more on information or assumptions of negative traits.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 July 2012

Revised 30 September 2013

Available online 19 October 2013

Keywords:

Power
Retributive justice
Punishment
Trait information
Legitimacy

ABSTRACT

In four studies, we investigated the effects of power on retributive justice judgments (i.e., the severity of punishment that people consider being fair). In Study 1, results revealed that participants who were primed with high power recommended more severe punishment than participants who were primed with low power, but only when the offender possessed negative character traits. In Study 2, these effects were replicated in an applied setting. In Study 3, we found that the inclination of power holders to base retributive justice judgments on negative traits only materialized when the power position was acquired legitimately. In Study 4, no trait information was given. Power again increased punishment, and this effect was mediated by trait appraisal ratings. It is concluded that legitimate power holders are more punitive due to their tendency to base retributive justice judgments on information or assumptions of negative traits that are stereotypically associated with offenders.

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Introduction

In everyday life, punishment of offenders is typically carried out by power holders. Corporate managers decide whether to reprimand or fire a lazy and underperforming employee, teachers take disciplinary measures against cheating students, and judges or juries decide about guilt and sentencing of criminals. Punishment is even—implicitly or explicitly—part of common definitions of power, which is often conceptualized as control over other people's outcomes, including the rewards and punishments that they receive (Fiske, 1993; French & Raven, 1959; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Smith, 2013). These considerations suggest that power holders play an important role in establishing a sense of *retributive justice*, which pertains to the extent to which people believe that offenders received

fair and appropriate punishment (Carlsmith, 2006; Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Hogan & Emmer, 1981; Miller & Vidmar, 1981; Van Prooijen, 2006; Van Prooijen & Kerpershoek, 2013). Despite such an intrinsic connection between power and punishment, there is a paucity of research studying what the implications of power differences are for evaluations of retributive justice, in particular the severity of punishment that people consider being fair and appropriate.

Circumstantial evidence obtained from research in various social settings suggests that power holders tend to endorse more severe punishment than people who lack power. For instance, research indicates that power holders are more inclined to enforce decisions through punishment instead of persuasion in an organizational simulation (Kipnis, 1972). Furthermore, court juries with nullification instructions—which increase their power to disregard the law if they believe that strictly applying the law would lead to an unfair outcome—have been shown to punish offenders that are considered potentially dangerous more severely than juries without nullification instructions (Horowitz, 1985, 1988). Finally, evidence reveals that in organizations increased power is associated with more negative performance

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evaluations (Georges & Harris, 1998). Given the importance of performance evaluations for people's careers, one might interpret these findings as power holders being not only more critical of employees' performance, but also more punitive. Taken together, these findings provide preliminary support for the proposition that higher power is sometimes associated with more severe punishment of offenders, in both organizational and legal settings.

Recent social-psychological studies offer only indirect evidence for the possibility that power holders are more punitive than non-power holders. For instance, research reveals that whereas power leads people to become more permissive of their own actions, they hold others to a more stringent moral standard (Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010). Furthermore, power has been associated with increased approach motivation and goal-directed behavior (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Keltner et al., 2003; Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). Such approach motivation pertains not only to the pursuit of positive goals (e.g., rewards), but it also pertains to acting against undesirable aspects of the direct environment. This includes acting against impersonal objects—such as turning off an annoying fan while performing tasks (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003)—as well as against other persons, as for instance evidenced in findings that power is associated with increased aggression (Fast & Chen, 2009; Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001; see also Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995). These processes may suggest that power holders are also likely to be more punitive, given that people's first impulse after an offense involve predominantly punitive instead of reconciliatory goals (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Admittedly, these findings are suggestive at best for a relation between power and punishment, and direct empirical evidence establishing if, and under what specific conditions, power holders more strongly endorse punishment of offenders is currently lacking.

The present research is designed to fill this void by examining the effects of power on retributive justice judgments. The main proposition that we investigate in this study is that people who have high power consider severe punishments as fairer than people who have low power. Moreover, we argue that the main explanation for this phenomenon is that power holders are more likely to base their punitive judgments on information or assumptions of negative traits that are stereotypically associated with offenders. As such, the present research is designed to extend previous studies by (a) providing evidence if, and under what conditions, power holders endorse more severe punishment for offenders than people who have low power, and (b) extending insights into the psychological processes underlying punishment by integrating the retributive justice and social power research domains. In the following, we introduce our line of reasoning in more detail.

Power and negative traits of offenders

As with many social categories, people stereotypically associate offenders with various traits. For instance, research on demonizing suggests that people often ascribe “evil” character traits to offenders (Baumeister, 1997; Darley, 1992; Ellard, Miller, Baumeister, & Olson, 2002). These traits are mentally integrated into a prototypical evilness scheme, that is, an interrelated set of negative traits that people expect offenders to possess (Van Prooijen & Van de Veer, 2010). Such a prototypical evilness scheme comprises, for instance, expectations that offenders lack uniquely human emotions (Leyens et al., 2000), are socially isolated (Baumeister, 1997), and have a reputation of immoral behavior that either holds no regard for other people's well-being, or is even aimed at intentionally hurting others (Berkowitz, 1999). But depending on the type of offense that was committed, people can also expect other, arguably less evil traits from offenders, such as laziness or carelessness in the case of offenses that were caused by negligence. Thus, people have stereotypical expectations of what traits offenders are likely to have, and descriptions of offenders can in various degrees be consistent or inconsistent with such expectations.

Research provides preliminary support for the assumption that such negative trait information influences punishment. In a study by Van Knippenberg, Dijksterhuis, and Vermeulen (1999), the authors investigated the impact of social categories that are versus are not stereotypically related to crime. Participants received information about an offender who was a bank employee (positive category offender) or about an offender who was a drug addict (negative category offender) and were asked to give judgments about guilt. Results revealed that, at least under conditions of cognitive load, individuals judge a negative category offender as guiltier than a positive category defendant. More generally, negative traits or social categories have frequently been associated with harsher punishment of offenders (Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985; Sweeney & Haney, 1992). In the present contribution, we propose that particularly power holders are likely to translate negative trait information into a preference for harsh punishment.

Our line of reasoning is rooted in theories on power and social cognition. A line of research that is particularly relevant for our purposes indicates that power holders stereotype others more than non-power holders (Fiske, 1993; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987; cf. Brauer & Bourhis, 2006), and pay more attention to stereotypic information, particularly when this information is negative (Rodriguez-Bailon, Moya, & Yzerbyt, 2000). Stereotyping among power holders occurs both by default and by design (Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000; Goodwin, Operario, & Fiske, 1998): Stereotyping by default pertains to low-level, relatively effortless processes that lead power holder to process information about social categories by relying on existing knowledge structures, hence paying attention to stereotype-consistent information and ignoring stereotype-inconsistent information. Stereotyping by design refers to the relatively more effortful process of motivated stereotype maintenance, which entails actively seeking confirmatory evidence for existing stereotypes. The relation between power and stereotyping converges with research revealing that power holders generally process social information more abstractly and heuristically than powerless individuals (Magee & Smith, 2013; Smith & Trope, 2006; Smith, Wigboldus, & Dijksterhuis, 2008), and suggests that particularly power holders are susceptible to stereotypic information when evaluating punishment for offenders.

The underlying process why such trait information may motivate a strong punitive preference among power holders can be found in social judgeability theory (Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994; cf. Croizet & Fiske, 2000; Goodwin et al., 2000): Power holders—due to the superior expertise, skills, or performance through which they acquired their power position—tend to experience a sense of entitlement to judge others, meaning that they have relatively more confidence in the correctness of their stereotypic beliefs and worldviews. Indeed, research reveals that power is generally associated with an increased confidence in one's beliefs (Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Beccera, 2007). This process suggests that power holders are more often prone to rely on existing knowledge structures—particularly in cases where trait information confirms and reinforces existing stereotypes—when evaluating what type of punishment is desirable for offenders. We propose that this greater reliance on stereotypically consistent trait information (i.e., “evil” trait information) exacerbates the extent to which power holder make attributions for the offense that implicate the offender, such as perceptions of blame, accountability, and malevolent intent, thus increasing the severity of punishment that is considered appropriate. Indeed, it stands to reason that the more one ascribes the offense to the offender's evil character traits, the more one considers the offender a liability for the future (or a possible repeat offender).

This inclination of power holders to base punitive judgments on trait information is less likely to emerge when the offender has traits that are inconsistent with common stereotypes about offenders (i.e., “non-evil” trait information). After all, such information violates the negative stereotypic expectations that people have of offenders, making it hard for perceivers—power holders and powerless individuals alike—to rely

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