

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

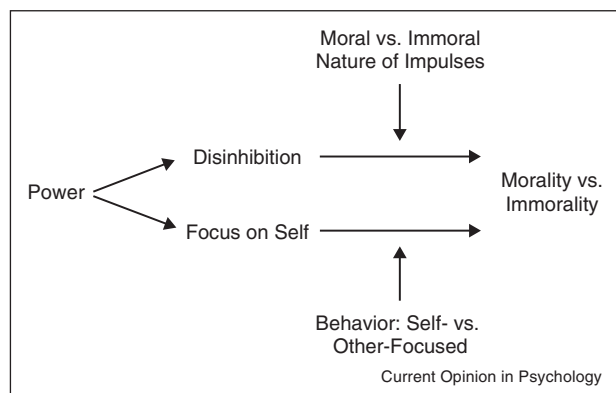
A sense of feeling powerful leads to behavioral disinhibition [4,5]. Power is disinhibiting, at least in part, because it activates the Behavioral Approach System, a dopaminergically driven brain pathway that increases reward pursuit [4]. As a result of this activation, power increases the likelihood 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

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