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The effects of power on prosocial outcomes: A self-validation analysis

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ABSTRACT

The present research distinguishes between primary (cognitive) and secondary (metacognitive) processes in the domain of power. Power is a central construct in economic decision making, influencing people's thoughts and behavior in organizational, political, consumer, and interpersonal contexts. Whereas most research has discussed ways that power can influence primary cognition (e.g., increased self-focused thoughts, heuristic processing), we examine how power can influence secondary cognition (i.e., thinking about thinking). We argue that high (relative to low) power can increase reliance on one's current thoughts, magnifying their influence on judgment. If thoughts are antisocial (prosocial), increased power will produce more antisocial (prosocial) judgments and behavior. We activated prosocial or antisocial concepts through priming before activating powerfulness or powerlessness. As predicted, primes impacted people's self-perceptions of cooperation (Experiment 1) and the extent to which they were willing to help others (Experiment 2) when induced to feel powerful, but not when led to feel powerless.

1. Introduction

Dual process and dual system theories have had a profound influence on social psychology, advancing our field's understanding of a diverse set of phenomena from persuasion to stereotyping to attribution processes (for reviews, see Carver, 2005; Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Deutsch & Strack, 2006). Most of these theories distinguish between simple or automatic versus more deliberative or controlled processes (e.g., Bargh, 1994; Devine, 1989; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977) or between impulsive and reflective systems of thought (e.g., Deutsch & Strack, 2006; Smith & DeCoster, 2000). These distinctions acknowledge that some mental processes are more likely to operate more efficiently than others depending on the circumstances, and some may even occur without intent or awareness (e.g., Bargh, 1994). In this paper, we focus on another form a duality in human thought: between primary and secondary cognition. We then apply this distinction to understanding an important construct in the social and economic domains: power.

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1.1. Primary versus secondary cognition

Research on metacognition distinguishes between primary thoughts and secondary thoughts (Flavell, 1979). Primary thoughts are those that occur at the direct level of cognition, and are often about some stimulus (e.g., "I should help that person in trouble"). Secondary thoughts, meanwhile, are those that are reflections on primary thoughts (e.g., "I am certain that I should help that person") or thoughts about thought processes (e.g., "My thoughts in response to this other person might have been biased by my positive mood;" for reviews, see Briñol & DeMarree, 2012b; Dunlosky & Metcalfe, 2009; Petty, Briñol, Tormala, & Wegener, 2007).

These secondary, metacognitive thoughts can take many forms (Briñol & DeMarree, 2012a; Wagner, Briñol, & Petty, 2012). For example, Dunlosky and Metcalfe (2009; see also Serra & Metcalfe, 2009) distinguish between metacognitive knoweldge (i.e., beliefs or lay theories about one's cognition; e.g., "re-reading my lecture notes will help me remember the material"), monitoring (evaluating one's cognition; "I'm likely to remember this information on the test"), and control (regulating or changing one's cognition; e.g., allocating one's study time to focus on information you don't yet know; see also Nelson & Narens, 1990). Ultimately, metacognitive control, which is informed by metacognitive knowledge and monitoring, is of central interest to people who study decision making, because such control is how metacognition can magnify, attenuate, or even reverse the impact of primary cognition on subsequent judgments and behavior (Petty et al., 2007).

In recent years, metacognition has assumed a prominent role not only in cognitive (for a review, see Dunlosky & Metcalfe, 2009) and social psychology (Bless, Keller, & Igou, 2009; Jost, Kruglanski, & Nelson, 1998), but also in clinical psychology (Wells, 2012), judgment and decision making (Dunning, 2012), organizational behavior (Thompson & Cohen, 2012), and consumer behavior (Rucker & Tormala, 2012). The central goal of the current work is to examine a metacognitive perspective on power, based on the *self-validation hypothesis* (Petty, Briñol, & Tormala, 2002; for a review, see Briñol & Petty, 2009). The self-validation hypothesis holds that accessible mental contents are used to the extent that they are seen as a valid basis for judgment and action and that many incidental variables can influence thought confidence. According to this view, a person's primary thoughts will be magnified when they are perceived as valid, and attenuated, or even reversed when they are perceived as invalid (Briñol, DeMarree, & Petty, 2010; DeMarree et al., in press). Perceptions of thought validity are a form of metacognitive monitoring, and the modification of the impact of these thoughts on judgment and behavior are a form of metacognitive control.

Critically, we argue that high power, relative to low power, is typically associated with increased confidence (i.e., perceptions of validity) in one's thoughts (Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007). This secondary appraisal of confidence determines the extent to which people rely on their primary cognitions. Interestingly, this perspective holds that increases in power can magnify (and decreases in power can attenuate or even reverse) the impact of *any* accessible thoughts, whether they are antisocial, prosocial, or asocial (e.g., one's evaluation of a potential investment). Thus, this perspective has the potential to account for a wide range of effects of power. Before going into more detail about this prediction, however, we first discuss existing research examining the diverse effects of power.

1.2. Psychological effects of power

Power has been recognized as a central motivating force in human activities (Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 1993; Parker & Rubenstein, 1981; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), influencing decisions in organizational (Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000; Shukla, 1982), political (Nullmeier & Pritzlaff, 2010; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974), consumer (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008), and interpersonal contexts (Galliher, Rostosky, Welsh, & Kawaguchi, 1999; Richeson & Ambady, 2003). Consequently, social scientists have argued for the importance of understanding the origins of power and its influence on a variety of outcomes. In accord with most of the social psychological literature (e.g., Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Overbeck & Park, 2001; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), we define power as an individual's perceived ability to control others' outcomes by providing or withholding rewards or punishments.

Power has wide ranging impacts on people's cognition and behavior. The majority of research has focused on antisocial consequences of power, such as teasing (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998); crime (Green, Wong, & Strolovitch, 1996); reckless drinking, gambling, and sexual activity (Winter & Barenbaum, 1985); and aggressive or hostile behavior (Bugental, Blue, & Cruzcosa, 1989; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986; Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001; Malamuth, 1996). However, experiencing power sometimes is also associated with relatively more positive and even prosocial consequences such as increased diligence (DeWall, Baumeister, Mead, & Vohs, 2011) and forgiveness of others (Karremans & Smith, 2010).

The proposed mechanisms by which power is thought to exert its influence are as wide-ranging as its effects. For example, power is hypothesized to increase abstract thought (Smith & Trope, 2006), produce approach- (Keltner et al., 2003; Smith & Bargh, 2008) or goal-oriented behavior (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Guinote, 2007b), increase attentional focus and flexibility of thought (Guinote, 2007a), and increase self-focus (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006). Power can also bias people's thoughts to be consistent with their initial preferences, reinforcing these inclinations (Copeland, 1994; Fischer, Fischer, Englich, Aydin, & Frey, 2011). Thus, there is a lot of research that has demonstrated that power can influence the types of thoughts a person has.

We should note that power cannot only change the content or style of thought, but it can also change the amount of thought. Most notably, people high in power are more likely to rely on stereotypes and other simple cues, rather than engag-