Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 53 (2014) 19–30

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

# Objects of desire: Subordinate ingratiation triggers self-objectification among powerful

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Four studies demonstrate that power can lead to self-objectification.
- Powerful self-objectify on power-relevant attributes but not on other attributes.
- Self-objectification affects self-definition and behavior.
- Self-objectification is triggered by subordinate ingratiation.

## ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Received 11 December 2012
Revised 26 January 2014
Available online 2 February 2014

*Keywords:*
Power
Self-objectification
Subordinate
Ingratiation
Favor
Instrumentality

## ABSTRACT

We propose that powerful individuals can become victims of self-objectification, whereby power-relevant attributes become more important to their self-definition and lead to behavior consistent with that self-definition. This process is triggered by the receipt of ostensibly kind acts from subordinates, which are interpreted by power-holders as objectifying acts of ingratiation. In Studies 1 and 2, high-power participants rated power-relevant attributes as more important to their self-definition, but only after a triggering event (i.e., receiving a favor, reading a scenario about a subordinate who voices agreement with his boss's ideas). In Studies 3 and 4, high-power participants who received a favor were more likely than others to believe that they are objectified for their power-relevant attributes. As a result, they rated power-relevant attributes as more important to their self-definition (Study 3) and were willing to pay more for products associated with power, but not for products unrelated to power (Study 4).



"What I am and can do is … not at all determined by my individuality… As an individual I am lame, but money provides me with twenty-four legs. Therefore I am not lame."- Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*, describing "capitalist self-estrangement"

Many people are attracted to power because it promises the possibility of pursuing one's own goals, unfettered by compromise and acquiescence to the desires of others. Consistent with this claim, recent research has demonstrated various ways in which power liberates (see Fiske, 2010). For example, high-power individuals are more likely to pursue personally held goals (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001) and to rely on their own opinions and attitudes rather than being influenced by external forces (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). The introductory quotation, however, suggests a contrasting dynamic. Rather than being liberating, power may impose certain attributes onto the self-concept. In the current research we build on this latter perspective to suggest that, under certain conditions, power-holders self-objectify, meaning that they increasingly define themselves through personal attributes that are relevant to power and instrumentally useful to others, and engage in actions that are consistent with this self-definition. Furthermore, we predict that this process is triggered by certain actions of their subordinates, rather than being a constant feature of power-holders.

We develop our predictions on four key points. First, power-holders are often targets of instrumental approach and use by lower-power individuals. Second, the manner in which lower-power individuals instrumentally approach power-holders is often indirect, including ingratiation and other ostensible acts of kindness. Third, power-holders are aware that the acts of kindness they receive may be instrumentally motivated, suggesting that they are aware of being objectified by lower-power individuals. Fourth, power-holders internalize this objectifying third-person perspective, leading to self-objectification.

The current research provides two key contributions. First, it presents a new way of thinking about the processes of objectification

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2014.01.010
0022-1031/

and self-objectification. Typically, lower-power and lower-status groups are considered as the victims of both objectification and self-objectification (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Marx, 1964). Here, we show that the reverse pattern can also emerge: Power-holders internalize the perspective of instrumentally motivated subordinates and self-objectify on personal attributes that are power-relevant. Second, the current research sheds a new light on the social psychology of power. Because power-holders doubt the motives behind the kind acts they receive from subordinates, they are more likely to self-objectify when triggered by subordinate ingratiation. Thus, rather than liberating the self (Chen et al., 2001; Fiske, 2010; Galinsky et al., 2008), power can impose certain objectifying attributes onto the self-concept.

## Self-objectification

Objectification is typically defined as the process by which a part of a person is separated out from the whole and is seen as capable of representing him or her (Bartky, 1990). While most often referenced in the context of gender dynamics, objectification has also been used to describe employers' treatment of workers (Marx, 1964) and power-holders' treatment of subordinates (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008), among other topics. Objectified attributes (e.g., productivity, physical attractiveness) tend to reflect agency rather than communion because the objectifier is not so much interested in a relationship with the target, but rather seeks to make instrumental use of the relevant attribute. Indeed, Wojciszke and Abele (2008) found that when one person depends on another for goal attainment, agentic qualities become more important in interpersonal perception. In Marx's example of objectification, capitalists depend on workers for their output, and so the workers' productivity (an agentic attribute) becomes the objectified attribute.

*Self*-objectification occurs when an objectifying third-person perspective is internalized, such that individuals are more likely to perceive *themselves* as an objectifier would. Fredrickson and colleagues (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fredrickson et al., 1998) proposed that an objectifying perspective on the self can be communicated directly through interpersonal interactions as well as indirectly through media or observations of others. With repeated exposure to such messages, objectified individuals eventually absorb this objectifying perspective into the self-concept (see Biddle, 1986; Cooley, 1964; Harter, 1987; Mead, 1934; Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007 for related processes).

### *Triggers of self-objectification*

Self-objectification is not necessarily always accessible or active, given that it is absorbed into the self-concept. Although self-objectification was initially conceptualized as an individual difference variable, Fredrickson et al. (1998) also theorized that, above and beyond individual differences, certain situations would act as triggers of self-objectification. Specifically, they proposed that situations that accentuate an awareness of an observer's objectifying perspective on the self would activate self-objectification. For example, women who were asked to put on a swimsuit (vs. a sweater) or who were targets of a sexualized gaze (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2011) were especially likely to sexually self-objectify. The notion that situations can activate different aspects of the self is also consistent with the idea that the self-concept is malleable and can shift according to subtle situational cues (Baumeister, 1998; Markus & Kunda, 1986; Wheeler et al., 2007).

### *Measuring self-objectification*

A variety of procedures have been used to test self-objectification. The most frequently used method is to demonstrate that self-objectifying individuals rate the objectified attributes as more important to their self-definition. For example, women placed greater importance on appearance-related physical attributes (e.g., weight, measurements, sex appeal) in their physical self-concept when they were exposed to sexism (a trigger of sexual self-objectification, Calogero & Jost, 2011). Also, women were more likely to describe their physical self-concept through statements about their body shape and size after trying on a swimsuit (another trigger of sexual self-objectification) versus a sweater (Fredrickson et al., 1998).

Another means of demonstrating self-objectification is through behavioral change. Research has shown that people engage in behaviors that are reflective of and consistent with their self-definition, including ways of dressing, standing, and talking (Oyserman, 2009).[1] In the domain of sexual self-objectification, a series of studies has shown that when women sexually self-objectify either chronically or as a result of a situational trigger, they wear tighter-fitting clothing, eat fewer cookies and spend more time doing cardio-based exercise (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005, 2008).

## Power and self-objectification

Although self-objectification has traditionally been examined in lower-status groups (e.g., women), we propose that the powerful too can self-objectify in certain situations. In the following sections, we outline a theory of when and why the powerful self-objectify.

### *Powerful individuals as objects*

Power is typically defined as relative control over valued resources, which in turn leads to increased interpersonal influence (Emerson, 1962; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). This definition brings to mind images of power-holders who use their subordinates to achieve goals: The powerful act and the subordinates react to accomplish the desires of the powerful (Fiske, 2010; Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Marx, 1964). However, the reverse pattern also occurs: Subordinates often attempt to manipulate and use power-holders to accomplish their own goals (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990; Yukl & Falbe, 1990). Specifically, subordinates may try to gain access to the resources that the powerful control. For example, a subordinate may try to influence his boss to give him an early promotion. A survey by Kipnis et al. (1980) illustrates this point well: The authors asked respondents (employees in an organization) to describe why they tried to influence their co-workers, who had more, equal or less power than the respondents. For those attempting to influence a co-worker with more power, their reasons were predominantly (58%) selfish: They were motivated by a desire to obtain personal benefits. In comparison, those attempting to influence equal-power or lower-power co-workers were less likely to be selfishly motivated (10% and 0% respectively). Of course, attempts to ingratiate the powerful are not confined to work situations and can emerge in any situation in which one person has more power than another.

### *Influence attempts: direct versus indirect*

The manner in which lower-power individuals attempt to use power-holders to achieve their own instrumental goals is less direct than traditional models of objectification. In traditional models (Emerson, 1962), a power-holder approaches a useful, lower-power individual and requests a specific outcome in exchange for access to the power-holder's resources (e.g., give me the output I want, and I will pay you more). Were lower-power individuals to demand or ask for access to the power-holder's resources, they would likely be met with rejection, as they have little to offer in return (Emerson, 1962;

[1] Oyserman (2009) uses the term "identity" rather than "self-definition." Because self-definition is closely related to identity and because we measure self-definition in our studies, we used the former term to avoid introducing too many concepts.