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Where could we stand if I had…? How social power impacts counterfactual thinking after failure

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Low versus high power diminishes self-focused counterfactuals (only) after failure.
- This effect is explained by the sense of personal control power comes with.
- The process is supported by both mediation and moderation analyses.
- We demonstrate when the powerless rather than the powerful engage in less thought.

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ABSTRACT

After failure, individuals often imagine how they could have achieved a better outcome, thereby learning to improve their behavior in the future. The current research investigated how social power affects such self-focused counterfactual thinking. Previous findings indicate that power evokes a sense of personal control. Sensed control in turn guides counterfactual thought, facilitating thoughts about those aspects individuals perceive control over. We thus proposed that compared to the powerful, the powerless sense lower personal control and therefore engage in less self-focused counterfactual thinking after failure. A field study and three experiments indeed demonstrated that being powerless (vs. powerful) diminished self-focused counterfactual thinking by lowering sensed personal control. This mechanism was also supported by experimentally manipulating the mediator and by ruling out an alternative mechanism (i.e., felt responsibility). Additional data indicated that self-focused counterfactuals in turn promoted learning (i.e., behavioral intentions). Extending prior research on power, action, and diminished thought, the results thus show that at times, those low, rather than high, in power think less about their own actions before taking the next step.

Introduction

Imagine an assistant and a manager finding out that a project proposal they have both intensively worked on was ultimately rejected. After such failure, individuals often wonder what they could have done differently to improve the outcome: Should the assistant have better prepared the details? Or could the manager have put more resources into the proposal to promote its acceptance? Counterfactual thoughts, like these, most often come to mind after failure (vs. neutral or positive results; e.g., Roese & Hur, 1997; Roese & Olson, 1997; Sanna & Turley-Ames, 2000) highlighting the necessity to revise one's strategies. Such thoughts on "what might have been" in turn facilitate learning from the past (e.g., taking preventive measures on the next proposal; Morris & Moore, 2000; Smallman & Roese, 2009), which is crucial in order for subordinates and leaders to promote organizational performance (cf., Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007; Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000; West, 1996).

Substantial evidence highlights the benefits of counterfactual thinking for subsequent behavior adaptation and performance (for an overview see Epstude & Roese, 2008; Markman & McMullen, 2003). However, research on the antecedents of counterfactual thought has so far neglected a central characteristic of social relations, namely social power. Therefore, the current research aims at bringing together research on social power and counterfactual thinking. We argue that after failure, experiencing low (vs. high) power diminishes counterfactual thinking on one's actions by reducing the sense of personal control (i.e., one's perceived opportunities to contribute to a task).

Such findings would complement prior research in two ways. First, research on the role of personal control in guiding counterfactual thought would be extended from individual to joint failure, thereby demonstrating how counterfactual thinking can depend on the personal control sensed in a *social* situation — here, a power context. Second,

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those *low* in power tend to act less (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Guinote, 2007c) and think more than those high in power (Karremans & Smith, 2010; Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014). As such, the current research examined conditions – namely after failure – under which those having *high* rather than low power do think more about their own actions before taking a next step.

How social power shapes behavior

Social power is the capacity to control one's own and others' outcomes (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), rendering individuals relatively independent from others and providing opportunities to act (Emerson, 1962; Fiske & Dépret, 1996). In their Approach Inhibition Theory, Keltner et al. (2003) argued that by providing access to resources and reducing constraints, power differentially activates the approach–inhibition system. While having low power evokes inhibition tendencies and a focus on potential threats or punishments, being powerful activates approach tendencies and a focus on rewards. In sum, the powerful are less inhibited in pursing their goals than the powerless. Adding to this, Guinote (2007a, 2010) proposed in the Situated Focus Theory that by reducing social constraints, power draws attention to one's goals or reduces distraction from these goals. As a result of their freedom, the powerful can focus more exclusively on focal goals and show more goal-directed behavior to obtain them. In contrast, those low in power need to pay attention not only to the focal goal at hand, but also to other things, such as how they are being evaluated by others (cf. Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Fiske & Dépret, 1996). Taken together, power is proposed to result in goal-directedness.

Power indeed fosters approach- and goal-directed behavior (e.g., Ferguson, Ormiston, & Moon, 2010; Galinsky et al., 2003; Guinote, 2007c), enables individuals to better distinguish goal-relevant from irrelevant information (Guinote, 2007b; Smith & Trope, 2006), promotes goal-directed strategies consistent with whichever goal is being pursued (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Guinote, 2008; Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, 2002), and heightens the selective sensitivity to goal-relevant situation characteristics (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Guinote, Weick, & Cai, 2012). This suggests that power holders are more goal-focused than those low in power.

Nonetheless, like the powerless, even power holders will occasionally face obstacles, giving rise to thoughts about the past. For situations like these, Karremans and Smith (2010) demonstrated that power diminishes rumination after a negative experience in social interactions. As such, rumination comprises uncontrollable thought (Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994; Scott & McIntosh, 1999) and it prevents individuals from moving on after the negative experience. Being more goal-focused, power holders thus engage in less rumination and move on more quickly than the powerless (Karremans & Smith, 2010). Ignoring negative information about goal striving would not, however, be in line with the sensitivity to goal-relevant information that results from social power (cf. Guinote, 2007a, 2010; Keltner et al., 2003). Due to their goal-directedness, power holders should actually respond to this type of information, but in a constructive way. Counterfactual thinking – a frequent response to failure – helps to put goal-directed behavior back on track (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Markman & McMullen, 2003). Thus, one could assume that the powerful, rather than the powerless, may generate more counterfactual thoughts on their actions after failure and, thereby, better learn to improve future performance, as we will discuss below.

In a study with managers, Goerke, Möller, Schulz-Hardt, Napiersky, and Frey (2004) demonstrated that power holders do indeed engage in counterfactual thinking when a *subordinate* performed poorly (Goerke et al., 2004). However, this study focused exclusively on *power holders*' thoughts and, thus, did not address the impact of high vs. low power per se. Conversely, in the present research, we investigate how power alters counterfactual thought in the first place and we specifically focus on joint failure (i.e., a failure not exclusively caused by another person, but potentially by both powerful and powerless individuals).

From social power to self-focused counterfactual thought

As power represents a feature of social relations (e.g., Fiske & Berdahl, 2007), most failures in power contexts likely involve more than one actor — such as when a powerful and powerless person are collaborating. Accordingly, in such contexts, counterfactual thoughts can have different reference foci, centering on alternatives to either personal actions (*self-focused* counterfactuals; e.g., "I could have provided more details to improve the outcome."), the interaction partner's actions (*other-focused* counterfactuals; e.g., "(S)he could have asked for more details."), or the situation (*situation-focused* counterfactuals; e.g., "We would have needed more *time* to write a better proposal."; cf. Epstude & Roese, 2008; Goerke et al., 2004).[1] Epstude and Roese (2008) argue that counterfactuals focusing on the *self*, rather than on others or situational factors, facilitate behavioral intentions and performance, as insights about one's own behavior aim at self-enhancement and can directly be implemented by the actor in the future (for evidence, see De Cremer & van Dijk, 2010).

We propose that those in power will generate more *self*-focused (but not other-focused) counterfactual thoughts after failure than those low in power. In short, this prediction was based on earlier research indicating that power induces a sense of personal control over outcomes and, thereby, promotes self-focused counterfactuals. In what follows, we present the background for this argument in more detail in two steps. First, by definition, power provides *actual* control over resources in a social situation. This means that the powerless have comparatively less means than the powerful, and will thus likely experience less control in this social situation (i.e., that they have less influence on the outcome of a joint task). More importantly for the hypothesis stated above, power promotes a sense of personal control not only within the given *social* context, but also referring to *other tasks* at hand (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009; Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012). This implies that the concepts of actual control in a social context (i.e., social power) versus *subjective* control on a task need to be distinguished. In sum, high power (vs. low power or a baseline) creates an illusory sense of personal control (i.e., that oneself *can* influence the outcome) that goes beyond actual (objective) power.

Second, sensing personal control facilitates thoughts about how one *could have* contributed to a better outcome after failure (i.e., self-focused counterfactuals). There is strong evidence that the experience of control plays a central role in counterfactual thinking and induces regret about not having done things differently (for summaries, see Beike, Markman, & Karadogan, 2009; Epstude & Roese, 2008; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Roese & Olson, 1997). As such, individuals generate counterfactuals after *control*lable events (vs. uncontrollable ones; Tykocinski & Steinberg, 2005). Importantly, they tend to generate counterfactuals that focus on those actions or task aspects that they *sense control over* (rather than aspects depending on chance; Girotto, Legrenzi, & Rizzo, 1991; Mandel & Lehman, 1996; Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1995). This previous research exclusively investigated

[1] Note that as additional dimensions, counterfactual structure (additive: imagining what one should have *done*; vs. subtractive: imagining what one should *not* have done) and direction (upwards: imagining *better* outcomes; vs. downwards: imagining *worse* outcomes) can be considered. These dimensions have been extensively studied, with upwards/additive counterfactuals representing the most common (e.g., Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993; Roese & Olson, 1993) and effective thoughts after individual failure (Kray, Galinsky, & Markman, 2009; Roese, 1994). The current research therefore focuses exclusively on the *reference focus* (self- versus other-focus) and how power predicts this, implying that the thoughts investigated are mostly upwards and additive. Nonetheless, additional analyses indicated that when including these thought dimensions, the results across all four studies mirror the results for self-focused counterfactuals, which are reported in this paper.