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Report

Getting what you want: Power increases the accessibility of active goals ☆

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ABSTRACT

Power facilitates goal-directed behavior. Two studies, using different types of goals, examined the cognitive mechanisms that underlie this tendency. Participants, primed with power or powerlessness, performed lexical decision tasks that assessed the relative facilitation of goal-relevant constructs during goal striving and after goal attainment. Results showed that during goal striving powerful participants manifested an increased facilitation of goal-relevant constructs compared to other constructs, and this facilitation decreased immediately after goal completion. In contrast, their powerless counterparts showed less facilitation of goal constructs during goal striving and maintained goal accessibility after completion. These results are consistent with the effects of power on goal-directed behavior found in past research.

Introduction

Powerful actors more easily attain desired outcomes. This occurs, in part, through the ways they pursue goals. Power facilitates the pursuit of goals that individuals associate with power (e.g., Bargh & Raymond, 1995; Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001), as well as the pursuit of rewards and opportunities (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). More generally, power increases goal-consistent behavior independently of the type of goal (Guinote, 2007a).

If research indicates that power facilitates goal pursuit what remains unexplained are the mechanisms that underlie these effects. The present article addresses this issue. We argue that power enhances the processing of information that is relevant, and decreases the processing of information that is irrelevant to goal pursuit. Furthermore, we argue that this increased goal accessibility occurs only when the goal is active (i.e., during goal striving). Once a goal has been completed, goal accessibility decreases, so powerful individuals are ready to respond to the new situation.

Imagine, for example, a student who is writing an essay. A powerful student (e.g., a dominant student) would focus her attention on the essay, and would attend less to distracting opportunities (e.g., entertainment). However, once the essay is completed this student would think less of the essay and be ready to respond to the new situation, for example, she would be attentive to entertainment opportunities. In contrast, a submissive student would think more of entertainment while working on the essay, and once the essay would be completed, she would continue to think of the essay as she did before, at the expense of entertaining herself. Overall, the information processing strategies of the powerful student, compared to the powerless student, would be more attuned to the active goal, and the phase of goal pursuit.

Power and goal pursuit

Powerful individuals are more disinhibited (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998; Keltner et al., 2003; Skinner, 1995; see also Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, 2002), and readily act in any direction (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). When pursuing a goal, they respond in a goal-consistent manner in all phases of goal pursuit (Guinote, 2007a; for phases of goal pursuit see Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987). For example, compared to powerless individuals, powerful individuals made quicker decisions regarding potential courses of action (Study 1), and persisted longer, using more flexible strategies, to pursue a difficult goal (Study 3). They also responded more to good opportunities that advanced goal pursuit (Study 4).

Furthermore, power leads to prioritization of the focal goal, and a decrease in responses to alternative goals (Guinote, 2008). It also increases resistance to external influences that may detract from pursuing an active goal (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Guinote, 2008, Study 5). The greater goal focus of powerful individuals occurs regardless of whether goals are activated by an act of will or by the environment (Guinote, 2008).

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Their greater attunement to focal goals affects the ways powerful individuals perceive others. For example, Vescio, Snyder, and Butz (2003) found that powerful individuals relied more or less on stereotypes depending on the informational value of stereotypes for their social influence strategies (see also Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005). Powerful individuals also perceive others as objects at the service of active goals (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Overbeck & Park, 2006).

In spite of the robust evidence that power promotes goal-directed behavior, little is known about the cognitive mechanisms that support the more focused actions of powerful individuals. Because accessibility of goal constructs is central for successful goal pursuit (Förster, Liberman, & Friedman, 2007; Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005; Gollwitzer, 1996; Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996; Kruglanski, 1996), we hypothesize that power increases the accessibility of goal-relevant information. Furthermore, because powerful individuals readily act in any direction (Galinsky et al., 2003), and are attuned to the current situation (Guinote, 2008), we argue that after goal fulfillment, power should immediately decrease goal accessibility.

Accessibility of goal constructs

Goals affect various levels of information processing. Firstly, once a goal is set it enhances the ability to detect cues in the environment that can facilitate goal attainment (Custers & Aarts, 2005; Förster et al., 2005). An active goal also affects the retrieval of information from memory. Once a goal intention has been formed, this intention receives a special status in long-term memory, represented by a subthreshold node, so individuals more easily activate intention-related memory entries compared to neutral memories (Goschke & Kuhl, 1993; Marsh, Hicks, & Bink, 1998; Marsh, Hicks, & Bryan, 1999).

Finally, while these processes imply a heightened activation of goal-relevant information, inhibitory processes also facilitate goal-directed behavior. In particular, goal pursuit is facilitated by the inhibition of alternative goals that individuals possess (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002; Shah & Kruglanski, 2003). Together, these patterns of selective information processing translate into an overall greater accessibility (i.e., a processing facilitation) of goal-relevant information compared to other information. Goal accessibility protects goal pursuit from distracting influences, and facilitates the advancement of the goal.

We argue that power increases goal accessibility during goal striving. In contrast, powerlessness induces a less selective information processing strategy. Powerless individuals should process information in a similar fashion regardless of whether they are striving for a goal or the goal has been attained.

Power, cognition, and goal pursuit

The hypothesis that power increases the accessibility of active goals is consistent with findings pointing out that power affects basic cognitive processes (Guinote, 2007b). Powerful individuals are better able to focus attention on a target and ignore distracting information. For example, when asked to draw a line with the same length as a master line, powerful individuals better ignored contextual information that could interfere with task performance (e.g., the size of the surrounding square) compared to powerless individuals (Guinote, 2007b, Study 1).

These effects are explained by the Situated Focus Theory of Power (Guinote, 2007c), in terms of increased processing selectivity, on a moment-to-moment basis, in line with active constructs. For example, when a need emerges, powerful individuals selectively respond to this need; when an expectancy is active, powerful individuals respond more in an expectancy-consistent way; and when entering a situation, they respond more in line with the affordances of the situation, compared to powerless individuals. Powerless individuals have less clear priorities. As a consequence, compared to powerless individuals, they change less behavior as the situation changes (e.g., a goal is completed, an affordance emerges, a need is satisfied).

These differences in responses seem to derive from the fact that cognition services adaptive action (see Fiske, 1992). Powerless individuals experience more constraints, and so are more motivated to process different types of information to increase predictability and control (see Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Keltner et al., 2003).

Our claim is consistent with the notion that power activates the behavioral approach system, whereas powerlessness activates the behavioral inhibition system (Keltner et al., 2003; Gray, 1982, 1987). Accordingly, power would increase goal accessibility. However, this would occur predominantly for goals associated to rewards and opportunities.

In summary, we expect powerful individuals, more than powerless individuals, to show an increased accessibility of goal-relevant constructs during goal striving, and a decrease in goal accessibility once the goal has been fulfilled. Two studies tested these hypotheses. Participants were assigned to a powerful or powerless condition and engaged in the pursuit of a focal goal. To measure goal accessibility they performed lexical decision tasks (LDTs) during goal striving and after goal fulfillment. Participants made decisions regarding words that were relevant or irrelevant to the focal goal. Faster response latencies on words related to a construct, compared to neutral words, indicate greater accessibility for this construct (see Neely, 1991, for a review). Power was manipulated by asking participants to recall an event in which they had power over someone or someone had power over them (Galinsky et al., 2003).

Study 1

Participants were assigned to a powerful or a powerless condition, and were asked to participate in a study that involved imagining working in a restaurant. Participants performed LDTs involving goal-relevant and irrelevant words. The role of mood and self-efficacy as potential mediators of the effects of power was assessed. Power has been linked to positive affect, and powerlessness to negative affect (Keltner et al., 2003). Therefore, the effects of power could be a result of changes in participants' mood. Similarly, the effects of power could derive from heightened self-efficacy. Greater self-efficacy is linked to greater goal focus (Bandura, 1997). It is therefore possible that powerful participants could show a greater goal focus because of greater self-efficacy beliefs.

Method

Participants

Eighteen students (11 females and 7 males) from the University of Kent, between the ages of 18 and 31 ($M = 21.51$) participated in exchange for a £4 reward. All participants were native English speakers.

Procedure and materials

Participants took part individually, and were informed that they would work on two independent studies. The first study allegedly investigated the perception of past events. Following Galinsky et al. (2003), participants described a past event in which they had power over someone or someone else had power over them. The written report was followed by a manipulation check that read "Now we would like to know how much in charge you were in this