



Power, stability of power, and creativity[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 August 2010

Revised 2 February 2011

Available online 21 March 2011

Keywords:

Creativity

Power

Global/local processing

Avoidance

Motivation

ABSTRACT

Power hierarchies are an essential aspect of social organization, create stability and social order, and provide individuals with incentives to climb the hierarchical ladder. Extending previous work on power and creativity, we put forward that this relationship critically depends on both the stability of the power hierarchy and the relevance of creative efforts to power. Across three experiments, we show that when power positions are unstable, low power individuals are more flexible thinkers, are less avoidant and process information more globally. Consequently, they achieve more creative insights, especially when being creative is relevant to power. As such, when the power hierarchy is unstable, those lacking power hold the power to creativity.

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Introduction

Power hierarchies are so pervasive across both animal species and humans, that it appears a fundamental feature of social organization. Apart from behavioral manifestations ranging from abuse to benevolence and generosity (e.g., Handgraaf, Van Dijk, Vermunt, Wilke, & De Dreu, 2008), possessing power in and by itself fundamentally influences individuals' information-processing and behavioral tendencies (Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). However, mixed findings emerge for creative performance, with some studies demonstrating that power leads to higher creativity (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Smith & Trope, 2006) while others point to an opposite pattern (Kuhl & Kazen, 2008). In this article we show that the relationship between power and creativity critically depends on both the stability of the power hierarchy and the relevance of creative efforts to power. When the power hierarchy is unstable, individuals with low power employ a global and flexible processing style and become more creative especially when being creative is functional to climbing the ladder.

Power leads to higher creativity

Power refers to the ability to influence others (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), and derives from a variety of power

bases, such as someone's position in the hierarchy within a group or organization, or the possession of valuable resources, such as knowledge and expertise (French & Raven, 1959; Lee & Tiedens, 2002; Podsakoff & Schriesheim, 1985; Yukl & Falbe, 1991). Power hierarchies create social order and stability, and because having power yields control over one's environment and resources to survive and prosper, individuals are motivated to climb the hierarchical ladder.

Recent work in psychological science revealed that power has metamorphic effects on power holders (Fiske, 1993; Keltner et al., 2003). Powerful individuals process information more abstractly and flexibly (Guinote, 2007a, 2007b; Smith & Trope, 2006; Förster, 2009), use less diagnostic and more confirmatory strategies (De Dreu & Van Kleef, 2004; Leyens, Dardenne, & Fiske, 1998), and are less influenced by situational cues (Galinsky et al., 2008) and emotional expressions of others (Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, & Manstead, 2006). Behaviorally, the powerful take more risks in their decisions (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), they act more swiftly when facing an annoying obstacle (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003) and behave more in a goal-consistent manner (Guinote, 2007a, 2007b).

The key explanation for these effects proceeds on the basis of the assumption that powerful individuals think and act so as to maintain and increase power (Bruins & Wilke, 1992; Maner, Gailliot, Butz, & Peruche, 2007; Maslow, 1937); powerless individuals, in contrast, think and act to protect against possible threat (in part coming from powerful others). As a result, having power leads to approach motivation with its concomitant global attentional focus (Förster, Friedman, Özelsel, & Denzler, 2006). Having power frees one from influence from others, and leads to feelings of safety and security (Friedman & Förster, 2010). Lacking power, in contrast, triggers avoidance motivation, a focus on potential losses, and a narrow

[☆] This research was supported by Grant NWO-400-06-098 from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) awarded to Carsten de Dreu and Bernard Nijstad, and the FMG-UVA Research Priority Grant on Affect Regulation. The authors thank Hillie H. Aaldering for coding data in Experiment 2.

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attentional focus (Keltner et al., 2003; Förster et al., 2006). Because both approach motivation (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Friedman & Förster, 2001, 2002, 2005) and global attentional focus (De Dreu, Nijstad, & Baas, 2011; Förster & Higgins, 2005; Förster, Friedman, & Liberman, 2004) promote cognitive flexibility, set-breaking and abstract thinking, it follows that powerful individuals also are more creative than their powerless counterparts (Förster, 2009; Galinsky et al., 2008; Smith & Trope, 2006; but see Kuhl & Kazen, 2008).

An interesting implication of this socio-functional perspective on power and cognition is that cognitive processes operate in the service of the underlying motivation to maintain and increase power. Put differently, the tendency among powerful individuals to think globally and display cognitive flexibility should be particularly pronounced when doing so serves the goal of maintaining or expanding power. When creative performance is functionally relevant to one's power position, we would thus expect more creativity than when creative performance is functionally irrelevant. An example of such functionally relevant creativity is when a middle-manager of a company is facing decreasing revenues, and new and creative ideas are needed to turn the situation around. By solving the company's problems in creative ways (e.g., through introducing new products or services, or by increasing market share through creative marketing) a manager can show high competence and may as a consequence be promoted to a higher position.

Psychological science provides some support for the idea that creative performance can be boosted when it is functionally relevant. Recent work shows that in addition to costs and risk, being original and creative accrues desirable benefits. For example, being creative increases individuals' attractiveness as a potential mate (Griskevicius, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006; Miller, 2000), and helps individuals winning a conflict (De Dreu & Nijstad, 2008).

Unstable power and creativity

A socio-functional perspective on power further implies that individual power is not a given and that power is not necessarily a stable feature of the situation within which the individual operates. Rather, power positions may change: powerful individuals may become powerless, and powerless people may become powerful (Tajfel, 1984). In an unstable power hierarchy, the powerful can be expected to be motivated to maintain their privileged position (Tetlock, 1981), especially when their position is directly disputed. They may become threat-oriented (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2008), leading the powerful to become risk averse and more focused on preventing that someone takes over (some of their) privileges (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008; Maner et al., 2007). Moreover, subtle cues signaling a potentially dangerous environment may lead to attentional focusing and less creativity (Friedman & Förster, 2010). When power becomes unstable, the intricate link between being powerful, approach motivation and global attentional focus may thus break down. Those having and valuing high power may become afraid of losing power, and powerless individuals face the prospect of moving up the hierarchy, thus realizing greater safety (Higgins, 1997). Those with low power may therefore become approach motivated and beget a broad attentional focus (Friedman & Förster, 2010; see also Kuhl & Kazen, 2008).

Indirect evidence for our thesis that the stability of the power hierarchy matters comes from work manipulating the legitimacy of the individual's power position. When the power position is legitimate, powerful individuals are more action-oriented, use more flexible strategies to attain their goals and are more persistent in the face of obstacles than powerless individuals. When the power position is illegitimate, however, the pattern reverses and powerless individuals display greater action-orientation and cognitive flexibility than powerful individuals (Willis, Guinote, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2009). Illegitimacy may undermine the perceived stability of the power

hierarchy, and increases the likelihood of losing power (among powerful individuals) and gaining power (among powerless individuals).

Accordingly, we expected that when the power hierarchy is stable, powerful individuals have stronger approach motivation, engage in more global rather than local processing, and therefore are more creative than powerless individuals. We furthermore hypothesized that when the power hierarchy is unstable, these general tendencies reverse: powerful individuals facing the possibility of power loss become avoidance oriented, engage in more local rather than global processing and become relatively more rigid and less creative in their thinking than powerless individuals facing the possibility of power gains. We finally hypothesized that the latter tendency for powerless individuals to be more creative than powerful individuals under unstable conditions is particularly pronounced when creative performance is functionally relevant, rather than irrelevant, to the goal of gaining power.

We tested these predictions in three experiments in which power roles were assigned and stability of power and functionality of creativity were manipulated. **Experiment 1** was a first test of our predictions using a creativity test of conceptual insight. **Experiment 2**, a brainstorm study, focused on unstable power positions and was designed to test if low power individuals would be cognitively more flexible and consequently more creative especially when creativity was functionally relevant. **Experiment 3** was designed to uncover the mediating process: it assessed whether it is approach (vs. avoidance) motivation, global (vs. local) attentional focus, or some combination of the two that explains why powerless individuals in unstable hierarchies are more creative than powerful individuals.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 was designed to test if under stable power high power individuals would be more creative than low power individuals especially when creativity was functionally relevant to power. Moreover, we tested if these effects would reverse under unstable power, making low power individual more creative than high power individuals. Our measure of creativity was the Remote Associates Test (RAT; Mednick, 1962), a test in which people have to break set to find one word that relates to three other words. The RAT benefits from flat associative hierarchies and seeing interrelationships between concepts, which is generally beneficial to creativity.

Method

Design and participants

One hundred thirty nine students (age $M = 21.3$, $SD = 4.2$; 51 male) participated for €7 (approximately U.S. \$9.50) or partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (power position: high vs. low) \times 2 (stability of power position: stable vs. unstable) \times 2 (functionality: relevant vs. not relevant) between-participants factorial design, with creative insight performance as the dependent variable.

Procedures and manipulations

Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants were seated in front of a computer with keyboard. Instructions and measures were given on the computer. Participants were told that they would engage in a task in which they had to work with another participant. Power position was manipulated by assigning participants randomly to the position of high or low power. Participants were told that the high power individual would be in charge of the division of labor, monitor progress and assess performance of the low power individual after completion of the joint task (see e.g., De Dreu & Van Kleef, 2004). The rewards of the low power individual would be contingent on this assessment. Stability of power position was manipulated by telling participants that power positions were assigned randomly and that

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