Leadership and the Psychology of Power

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INTRODUCTION

Leaders wield power in many different ways. From the heroism of Martin Luther King, Jr., to the atrocities of Slobodan Milosevic—and the wide range of more mundane prosocial and antisocial behavior in between—many leaders' actions share something in common. They reflect a disregard for norms and a reduced concern for certain kinds of social consequences in the name of pursuing personal goals and objectives. In research on leadership, the willingness to take controversial stands and defy social convention is, like many other leadership qualities, most often attributed to personality characteristics, or to the fit between a leader's personality and the social context in which it is exhibited (for a review see Haslam, 2001).
In contrast, we suggest that leaders' responses to aspects of their own leadership status transform their behavior in ways that contribute to these phenomena. Our perspective suggests that leaders share a set of psychological processes that are not typically examined in leadership research. In this chapter, we offer some theory and data on the psychology of power that inform our understanding of how leaders think and how they behave.

We begin with a brief review of leadership research to illustrate how theories of power can inform future leadership studies. After discussing the connection between leadership and power, we present evidence of the psychological processes that explain counter-normative behavior—both prosocial and antisocial—in leaders who have power. Next, we describe important moderating conditions that help fine-tune the fit between our research and the study of leadership, and we conclude with some implications for the practice and study of leadership.

From Leadership to the Psychology of Leaders

Most studies of leadership have focused on four topics (for more complete reviews, see Bass, 1981; Goethals, chap. 5, this volume; Haslam, 2001; Hollander, 1985). First is the study of personal characteristics, such as charisma (Bass & Avolio, 1987, 1993; House & Shamir, 1993; Bligh & Meindl, chap. 2, this volume), and experiences (Gardner, 1995; Simonon, 1987) that breed effective leaders. A second interest of leadership researchers has been the concept of leadership style (e.g., directive, transactional, transformational), and studies have examined both the qualitative makeup (Bass & Avolio, 1993; House & Shamir, 1993) and effectiveness (Larson, Foster-Fishman, & Franz, 1998; Peterson, 1997) of the alternatives. A third class of research has investigated perceptions of leadership (Lord, 1977; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1984; Peterson, 1999; Simonon, 1987). The fourth area is integrative, with researchers documenting dynamic processes between leaders and followers (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978; Gardner, 1995; Hogg, Hains, & Mason, 1998; Messick, chap. 4, this volume).

These traditions treat many important aspects of the social psychology of leadership, yet most provide little insight into the psychological responses of leaders. That is, there is little research that can be used to predict what will happen inside a person's mind under leadership conditions. Once an individual occupies a leadership position, structural factors inherent in the leader-follower relationship—for example, power differences—can cause changes in the psychological functioning of that
individual (e.g., Fiske, 1993; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2000, 2003; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Kipnis, 1972). We believe that in becoming leaders, individuals may experience changes in how they think of their work, how they think of themselves, how they think of others, and, consequently, how they act. Thus, in contrast to the tenor of many writings of history, literature, journalism, and psychology, we believe that many of the more unusual behaviors displayed by those in leadership positions are attributable not just to personality or role requirements, but also to the experience of power and its psychological effects.

Power and Leadership

The concepts of power and leadership are historically and functionally linked (French & Snyder, 1959). Leadership is often defined as the process of guiding others’ actions toward the achievement of group goals (Hollander, 1985). Power is generally defined as the capacity to guide others’ actions toward whatever goals are meaningful to the power-holder (e.g., Blau, 1964; Dahl, 1957; Fiske, 1993; Gruenfeld, Keltner, & Anderson, 2003; Keltner et al., 2003; Thibault & Kelley, 1959; Weber, 1947). According to these definitions, power provides a means of accomplishing the work of leadership, and it can also be a by-product of having done so effectively. Thus, power and leadership often go hand-in-hand, yet the effectiveness of leaders and power-holders are judged using different criteria. Typically, great leadership is attributed to those who are perceived as having provided a vision that inspired others to cooperate for the benefit of the group (Cronshaw & Lord, 1987). Power, in contrast, is perceived in those who are able to influence others, using whatever means necessary, independent of the social value of the outcomes achieved. Good leadership is typically defined in terms of organization effectiveness; it is attributed to the individual who appears to have had the greatest positive impact on the behavior of many organization members. In contrast, a person’s ability to wield power effectively is judged in terms of the power-holder’s personal success and accomplishment. From this perspective, all effective leaders have power but not all power-holders are leaders.

Throughout this chapter, we refer to “leaders” as people who are categorically distinct from those who are “followers” and other non-leaders. We also refer to “the powerful” or “high-power” individuals, and, correspondingly, “the powerless” or “low-power” individuals as if these labels correspond with categorical positions, although we do not see power as a categorical variable. Rather, we view power as a relative condition, noting
that in most social exchanges all parties possess power, even if some possess more than others (Gruenfeld & Kim, 2002). This is yet another way in which power and leadership differ, in theory, if not in practice.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF POWER ON LEADERS

In our review of the literatures on power and leadership, we have been struck by the evaluative assumptions underlying many of the approaches to understanding these phenomena. On the one hand, the “great man” approach to the study of leadership, which is still quite prominent in many disciplines, has involved attempting to identify the character attributes and specific behaviors that distinguish leaders, who are characterized as great, from mere mortals, who are not (e.g., Fleischman & Peters, 1962; Pears, 1992; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). On the other hand, there are some accounts of power and leadership that evoke Lord Acton’s famous observation that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

In psychology, Kipnis (1972, 1976) was the first to empirically examine the notion that power can corrupt a person’s disposition in predictable ways. In a role-playing exercise, managers who possessed power in addition to authority used more influence tactics, valued subordinate performance less, felt more control over subordinates’ efforts, were more likely to perceive subordinates as “objects of manipulation,” and expressed a greater desire for psychological distance from subordinates than managers who did not possess power (Kipnis, 1972). A study by Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, and Strack (1995) showed that power is associated with sex in the mind, and that males who are already prone to sexual harassment are even more prone to harass under conditions of power. Kipnis (1976) argued that, in general, power-holders exhibit egocentrism that breeds feelings of superiority, which contribute to corrupt behavior. Recent accounts of CEO hubris (Hayward & Hambrick, 1997; Zellner & Forest, 2001) are consistent with this perspective.

Thus, it appears that leaders and the powerful are often either revered or demonized by those who study them. Yet it almost goes without saying that the power leaders possess allows them to behave admirably as well as disgracefully. We believe that leaders with power are likely to be both more admirable and more disgraceful than those without power, and that these alternatives are likely to vary more within than across individuals. Consistent with this argument, there are many memorable examples of
leaders whose public policies were inspirational while their personal lives were a public embarrassment. However, there have been relatively few attempts to account theoretically for both prosocial and antisocial leadership behaviors. Winter (1973, 1988, 1998) showed how the power motive can lead to both accomplishment and profligate behavior among U.S. presidents. Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh (2001) showed that the effects of power depend on a person's social relationship orientation: in a resource allocation task, participants with a communal orientation were more selfless, and participants with an exchange orientation were more selfish, under conditions of power. On average, participants' behavior corresponded to their internal standards rather than to any external standard, or norm, that they might have used to regulate their natural tendencies.

These findings are consistent with our earlier assertion that power affects leadership by facilitating the unfettered pursuit of personally meaningful goals. Power intensifies goal pursuit, we believe, via activation of the behavioral approach system. According to the approach theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003), the behavioral approach system induces positive affect, a focus on rewards rather than punishments, decisiveness and disinhibited social behavior among the powerful. In contrast, the behavioral inhibition system is activated in those without power. In this view, power frees those who possess it from inhibitions that might otherwise constrain their behavior. Thus, leaders can be transformed via the possession of power, becoming less deliberate and more action-oriented as their power increases (Galinsky et al., 2000; Gruenfeld & Kim, 2002). In the following sections we provide empirical evidence of how this can occur.

Power and Action-Orientation

Galinsky et al. (2000, 2003) have found direct support for the link between power and action-orientation in a series of experiments. Specifically, we have shown that participants in high-power conditions exhibited a greater intention to act, that they were more implemental than deliberative in their thinking about action, that they were more likely to act when it was unclear whether they were allowed to do so, and that they were more likely to act in both prosocial and antisocial ways than participants in low-power conditions.

In the first experiment (Galinsky et al., 2000), partners in a negotiation scenario were assigned to high-power or low-power conditions. High-power participants received role materials that explained they had an attractive alternative to a settlement with their partner (a strong "best
alternative to negotiated agreement,” or BATNA) whereas low-power participants’ instructions did not suggest that there were any alternative opportunities available. Prior to negotiating, we measured participants’ intentions, looking specifically at whether they spontaneously mentioned intending to make a first offer or not. Consistent with the notion that power increases an action-orientation, we found that subjects in the high-power condition were significantly more likely than those in the low-power condition to express an intention to make a first offer.

In the second experiment (Galinsky et al., 2000), half of the participants were asked to write about a time when they had power over someone else (high-power condition), and the other half were asked to write about a time when someone else had power over them (low-power condition). Participants were led to believe that this exercise was unrelated to subsequent tasks. Thus, this exercise served as a power-priming manipulation. Next, participants were asked to complete an unfinished fairy tale by writing three additional sentences. The partially completed fairy tale, taken from Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, and Steller (1990), describes a king who must go to war and seeks someone with whom he can entrust his daughter. Consistent with our expectations, participants in the high-power condition described an action-oriented king who was decisive and quick to act, whereas those in the low-power condition described a king who was more hesitant and prone to deliberate. In addition, content analysis revealed that high-power participants’ fairy tales described the king as somebody who delegated tasks and asked for favors, and who faced significantly fewer obstacles than did low-power participants.

Thus, recollections of power and powerlessness seemed to activate different perceptions of the social environment. Whereas powerlessness led participants to project constraint onto the fairy tale protagonist, power led participants to project the absence of constraint onto the same protagonist. Moreover, those without power tended to view other people as barriers to the protagonist’s goals, whereas people with power saw others as instrumental agents for their goals, as means to an end—a point to which we return later.

In a third experiment (Galinsky et al., 2003), participants completed either the high-power or the low-power priming task just described and were subsequently led to a room in which they were to complete the “real” experiment. On the desk in each room was a small fan, blowing at a moderately strong rate directly into the chair where they were supposed to sit and work. Consistent with our expectation, participants in the high-power condition were significantly more likely to either move the fan or turn it
off than those in the low-power condition, who were more likely to com-
plete the experiment with the fan blowing directly into their faces. Thus,
participants with power were more likely to take action by removing an
annoying stimulus in a situation where it was not clear whether or not they
were allowed to do so.

These findings suggest that leaders with power have an action-orientation
that leads to a narrowed focus on goals and a disregard for information that
might hinder goal accomplishment. This bias should be functional when
quick implementation is needed and there are many possible effective
actions, but it should be dysfunctional when careful deliberation is required
in order to determine the best alternative. Decision makers who consider
alternatives carefully and weigh the trade-offs among them are often more
accurate (Gruenfeld & Hollingshead, 1993; Tetlock & Kim, 1987), and
they may stay in power longer than those who evaluate response options
more single-mindedly (Suedfeld & Rank, 1976). Yet decisiveness and the
ability to act quickly are considered key leadership strengths (Tetlock,
Peterson, & Berry, 1993). This tension suggests that an action-orientation
can have both positive and negative consequences for leaders.

Of course, the effectiveness of an action-orientation also depends on the
consequences of the action chosen, not only for the actor, but also for those
affected by his or her decisions. When actions are beneficial to the power-
holder but not to dependents, the seeds of corruption are sown. To show
that the association between power and action could lead to both functional
and dysfunctional ends, Galinsky et al. (2003) compared the actions of par-
ticipants with power and the actions of participants without power in two
social dilemma games. In both games, we predicted that participants with
power would be set on acting to solve a problem and, thus, would be more
assertive than participants without power. Specifically, we expected high-
power participants both to contribute more to a common resource in a Pub-
lic Goods Dilemma (e.g., a public television station) and to take more from
a finite common resource in a Commons Dilemma (e.g., electricity) than the
low-power participants. As predicted, participants primed with power acted
with greater intensity than participants primed with lack of power or control
participants (who described a day in their life, rather than writing about
power or powerlessness), regardless of whether the action was prosocial or
antisocial. High-power participants gave more to the public good and took
more from the commons than either the control participants or the low-
power participants. Taking action was the consistent theme for those with
power: the consequence of action, whether it was exhausting a resource or
fostering a valuable fund, seemed less important than asserting oneself.
In sum, these considerations suggest that leaders with power tend toward an action-orientation: they are less prone to deliberate about their response options and to weigh the trade-offs associated with alternatives and are more prone to act decisively—perhaps impulsively—on the first action alternative that comes to mind. But what about when effective leadership requires not acting? We propose that the same psychological processes that help leaders strive toward the accomplishment of objectives make it extremely difficult for them to resist the temptation to act even when acting is inappropriate.

Power and Disinhibition

Leaders are typically held to high standards of discipline: they are expected to act decisively on behalf of the greater good but to control themselves when tempted to act for personal gain. Morally speaking, this seems like a reasonable set of expectations, but from the present psychological perspective, they appear less tenable. We have proposed that power activates an action-orientation, which should be functional when persistence is necessary. At the same time, an action-orientation is incompatible, we believe, with resistance.

Keltner et al. (2003) suggested that disinhibition occurs when behavioral approach, rather than inhibition, is activated for those in power, noting that the inhibitions that we experience in the presence of social constraint are simply not activated when social constraints are either absent, dismissed, or unobserved. In support of this argument, the authors document the effects of power on inhibitions related to eating and sexual behavior. In a study of eating and manners, Ward and Keltner (1998) showed that people who had power by virtue of their role as evaluator were more likely to consume (i.e., approach) food when it was a scarce resource (consistent with Galinsky et al., 2003), but also that they were less likely to exhibit table manners (i.e., inhibit) than people who were being evaluated. Evaluators, who had power, were more likely to take the remaining cookie from a plate, which left others without seconds. Furthermore, evaluators ate their cookies with greater abandon, chewing with their mouths open and spilling more crumbs on their faces and on the table than those without power.

Prior experimental research has shown a similar relationship between power and sexual activity. As noted earlier, Bargh et al. (1995) showed that power activates sexual thought and increases reports of attraction toward a female confederate for men who possess a chronic sexual approach
goal (see Higgins, 1996, for a review of chronic goals). Also, both men and women who are in a position of high-power flirt more aggressively than their low-power counterparts (Gonzaga, Keltner, Londahl, & Smith, 2001).

These studies show how power can release inhibitions and affect the tendency to self-regulate. Self-regulation involves persistence toward accomplishing goals and resistance against temptations that distract from goal accomplishment (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Mischel, Cantor, & Feldman, 1996; Wegner & Bargh, 1998). Muraven, Baumeister, and colleagues (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000) have shown that people who are forced to either struggle through a difficult task or suppress desires early in an experiment are worse at self-regulation on later tasks. Rather than functioning like a skill that improves with practice, self-regulation appears to be like a resource that can run out, or like a muscle that tires after too much exercise (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). We posit that power, by activating approach tendencies, can also lead to an overemphasis on persistence that ultimately weakens the ability to resist. Think of the self-regulation muscle as having a flexor and an extensor. The flexor, which is stronger, controls the work of approach, promotion, and persistence, effectively pulling goals closer. As a consequence, the extensor is less able to control avoidance, prevention, and resistance, and is ineffective in pushing temptation away. The dominance of the flexor over the extensor is a useful metaphor for understanding disinhibition in response to power. It explains how those with power can be both heroic and reprehensible.

In sum, these considerations suggest that leaders with power, while experiencing increased action-orientation, can also experience a decreased ability to control their responses to temptation. In this light, the examples of powerful leaders who disappoint their followers by revealing an unseemly personal life can be easily understood. Among the powerful, the ability to accomplish great work and the susceptibility to forces of depravity can be seen as two sides of the same coin.

Power and Objectification

The preceding discussion suggests that individuals with power pursue personal goals without concern for the social consequences of their actions, which can logically lead to social exploitation. The association between power and exploitation is widely held and passionately documented (e.g.,
Marx, 1970), although it is clear that the link between power and corruption is not absolute (Barber, 1972). However, it can be argued that individuals with power, because they are less dependent on others than vice versa, are less concerned with how others will judge their actions, and are less attentive to the internal experiences of others in general, than those without power. Perceivers who lack social control are motivated to understand the causal relations in their environment, which leads to systematic consideration of the factors that compel others to behave as they do, including dispositional and situational influences (Gilbert, 1998). In contrast, understanding how others feel and what they believe is less important for perceivers who possess power because these factors might appear less likely to have an impact on their own goal attainment (Miller, Norman, & Wright, 1978). Moreover, because their own goals are so salient and their concerns about others' evaluations are not, we believe that the powerful will often perceive others through a lens of self-interest, leading to what we call objectification.

Objectification is defined in this work as the process of viewing other people instrumentally, in terms of the qualities that make them useful to the perceiver as opposed to the qualities that allow them to be understood as unique human beings. Although we have only recently begun to investigate these ideas empirically, we believe that objectification involves, specifically, a lack of attention to others' internal experiences, or human qualities (e.g., feelings, beliefs, and preferences), the tendency to see others in terms of object qualities (e.g., physical attributes, and material possessions), and viewing others as tools for goal accomplishment (i.e., as means to an end). This perspective suggests that, contrary to the implications of some studies (e.g., Chance, 1967; Ellyson & Dovidio, 1985; Fiske, 1993), power does not necessarily reduce overall attentiveness to other people. Rather, we assert that power reduces attentiveness to others' interests, feelings, beliefs, expectations, and unique experiences, which are the qualities that define them as human beings.

To demonstrate the objectification phenomenon, we (Gruenfeld, Galinsky, & Magee, 2001) initially tested the hypothesis that power is associated with low levels of perspective-taking. After priming the experiences of power and powerlessness using the procedure described earlier, participants were asked to draw an "E" on their foreheads (Hass, 1984). Consistent with our expectations, subjects in the high-power condition displayed their disregard for others' perspectives by drawing the "E" so that it was illegible (i.e., backward) to any observer but legible (i.e., forward) to themselves. In contrast, subjects in the low-power condition were more
likely to draw the “E” so that others could read it but it was illegible (i.e., backward) from their own perspective. Though participants in both conditions were more likely to draw an E oriented to an observer, high-power participants were almost three times as likely as low-power participants to draw an E oriented to the self (33% vs. 12%). These results suggest that power reduces one’s ability to see the world through others’ eyes, an effect that could logically contribute to social exploitation.¹ This finding adds to the literature on social inattentiveness among the powerful by demonstrating that power is associated with inattentiveness to targets’ experiences.

Research by others demonstrates how power directs social attention to those aspects of others that are relevant to personal goals. In a study of the effects of power on stereotype use, Overbeck and Park (2001) showed that individuals with power who were asked to review possible job applicants were more likely to use stereotypes and less likely to use individuating information than those without power (see also Goodwin & Fiske, 1993) unless attention to individuating information was explicitly relevant to the organization’s goals. These findings suggest that, consistent with our argument, those with power can be relatively inattentive to individuals’ unique characteristics, except when those features of a target are relevant to personal goal attainment.

Research has also shown that the effects of power on social perception can bias their social judgments. For example, members of majority groups, who have power because they represent the status quo, are more likely to (inaccurately) characterize their minority-group counterparts as extremists than vice versa (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1998; Keltner & Robinson, 1996, 1997). In addition, power-holders have been shown to ascribe less-than-deserved credit to their subordinates. Kipnis (1972) found that experimental subjects with power attributed the performance of their subordinates to their own efforts and influence rather than to the subordinates themselves, and this effect increased with the degree of power. More recently, it was shown that after group tasks, low-power participants were more likely than high-power participants to acknowledge others’ contributions

¹Ironically, we have argued that power increases attentiveness to one’s personal goals while simultaneously making one less self-aware. Yet we believe these are quite different, corresponding to Mead’s (1934) “I” and “me,” respectively. Self-attention corresponds to perception of one’s needs and desires, whereas self-awareness is defined as consciousness of the self as an object of evaluation (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). The psychological profile associated with high self-attention and low self-awareness can logically be associated with all kinds of scandalous (and illegal) incidents that mar the reputations of high-profile leaders, including illegal forms of sexual misconduct and financial mismanagement, for example. These types of incidents are not only bad for the leader’s reputation, but often they are exploitative of and destructive to others.
to collective outcomes (Fan & Gruenfeld, 1998; see also Pfeffer, Cialdini, Hanna, & Knopoff, 1998).

It is interesting to note that all of the misperceptions we have observed are associated with negative, rather than positive, evaluations of others. Consistent with this possibility, Kipnis (1972) found that high-power participants in his study were less interested in meeting with their subordinates socially, after the experiment, than subordinates were in meeting with them. Interestingly, we have found recently that subjects who completed our high-power prime subsequently described the experimenter—a high-power target—in more disrespectful terms than subjects who completed the low-power prime (Magee, Gruenfeld, & Galinsky, 2003). Thus, social perception by those under conditions of power can lead to negative evaluations of both high- and low-power co-workers.

These findings add to the previous literature on power and social perception by suggesting that the lens of self-interest, in addition to differences in cognitive load among individuals with power, probably contributes to biased social perceptions among the powerful. We believe that power deflects attention away from social cues, toward internal goals and psychological cues, affecting the focus, not just the amount of attention paid to others. Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, and Yzerbyt (2000) have shown that power increases stereotyping both by increasing attention to stereotype-consistent information and by decreasing attention to stereotype-inconsistent information. We note that power can also lead to a lack of consideration of others’ interests and emotions, to an increased focus on the characteristics of specific targets that are useful in attaining one’s goals, and to a demonstrated disinterest in others who do not seem currently useful.

To accomplish organizational objectives and to satisfy their desires, power-holders can, and do, use the people around them. We have proposed that using others to accomplish personal goals often leads to their objectification. Objectification can be conscious, as when supervisors delegate “dirty work” that they themselves find distasteful or immoral (Kipnis, 1972); however, our perspective on this phenomenon highlights some of its non-conscious aspects. By focusing instrumentally on the aspects of others who are important for goal attainment, individuals with power often inadvertently ignore social information that is important to others. This would not matter if power-holders did not have morals, or if their power was absolute and invulnerable; however, many individuals with power come to regret their treatment of others in the past. In fact, Magee et al. (2003) found that among experimental participants who wrote about a time when they had power over others, their biggest regret was how they treated
others. In contrast, those who wrote about a time when someone else had power over them regretted not having asserted their own interests.

To summarize, in this section we have described how power can lead to the objectification of social targets. It does not take much imagination to see how these processes can affect leadership effectiveness. As we noted earlier, objectification can lead to exploitation, which is likely to compromise leadership effectiveness in the long term, if not in the short term. Employees who feel they are treated without consideration of their interests contribute to turnover, malaise, and low organizational commitment. They are also responsible on occasion for expensive law suits and bad press for those who employ them. In light of current corporate debacles (Gladwell, 2002), it is important to note that people who are treated as though they are mindless vehicles for goal accomplishment can, through self-fulfilling prophecy, become mindless vehicles for goal accomplishment, behaving in ways they do not condone, while holding others (i.e., superiors) responsible for their own actions.

MODERATING FACTORS

The constellation of mechanisms described so far is expected to generalize across social systems to the extent that power differences exist. However, each of the mechanisms is susceptible to moderation by a number of other variables that can accompany power and leadership. Two of these variables are particularly relevant to leadership as it is discussed here. One is accountability: leaders are typically accountable for organization outcomes and generally are held personally responsible for the success and failure of the groups they lead (Meindl et al., 1984). Personal accountability is a form of social constraint that should counteract the disinhibiting effects of power, potentially increasing the extent to which leaders consider a wide range of possible consequences of their actions before choosing to act. Second, the stability of the social system in which a leader is embedded (i.e., the permanence of his/her position) could also affect the extent to which these processes occur. In this section, we discuss how accountability and social system instability might moderate the effects of power on leaders.

Accountability

One important variable that often accompanies structural power, particularly in organizational contexts, is personal accountability for one’s
actions. People who are able to control others' outcomes but know they will be held accountable for the means and consequences of their actions are more likely to consider social consequences and take others' interests into account than those who are not accountable (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Tetlock, 1992). This explains why U.S. presidents exhibit greater cognitive complexity after they are elected than prior to election (Tetlock, 1981). Although U.S. presidents possess greater power than presidential candidates, presidents are more accountable to a larger and more diverse set of constituents for the consequences of their policy actions than are presidential candidates. Presumably, accountability constrains the disinhibiting effects of power because leaders wish to avoid the social punishments that those with less power can potentially invoke, such as dislike, disapproval, disrespect, and ultimately the removal of power. Thus, leaders may attempt to control their behavior because they do not want to lose power and status.

System Stability

Conditions that affect the maintenance of power can also moderate its psychological effects. People become leaders through a number of different mechanisms and a variety of different systems, and these mechanisms can affect the conditions under which the leadership position is likely to change. A leadership position can be inherited due to circumstances of birth, acquired through hiring or promotion, won via an election, or stolen by attracting followers away from another, more “legitimate” leader. These are only a handful of leadership determinants, and each implies a different type of power base. The leaders of organizations and nations, for example, possess formal authority and control vast resources and, as we see in current world politics, both are a great source of power. The leaders of many kinds of grass-roots groups, in contrast, possess few material resources and little formal authority but are effective nonetheless based on their referent power (see French & Raven, 1959, for a discussion of reward, coercive, and referent power).

In a democracy or a meritocracy, leaders are vulnerable to having their power revoked or usurped. We assume that when power is negotiable, it is less likely to lead to disinhibition than when it is irrevocably bestowed. This suggests that leaders whose legitimacy is challenged should be less likely to disinhibit than those whose legitimacy is more secure. Consistent with this notion, studies of reasoning by Supreme Court justices show that the greater the challenge to the majority, the higher the complexity exhib-
ited in majority opinions (Gruenfeld & Kim, 2002; Gruenfeld & Preston, 2000). It has also been shown that hate crimes against minority members peak when the power distance between majority and minority groups is the greatest, and that the incidence of hate crimes drops off as the proportion of minority members in a community grows (Green, Wong, & Strolovitch, 1996).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we reviewed the effects of power on those who possess it. We documented our central thesis—that power is disinhibiting—and explained the psychological mechanisms underlying this effect. We have argued that the experience of power increases a focus on goal implementation, changes self-regulation processes, and alters attention to the self and others, thereby restoring a direct link between goals and the acts that satisfy them. Furthermore, we explored the implications of these mechanisms for behavior in a number of specific social contexts, and we identified two important factors—accountability and stability of the system that supports the leader’s position—that moderate the psychological effects of power.

The arguments presented here have important implications for leaders, who typically possess power over those whom they lead. It might be helpful for leaders to know that their power can incite them to act, not only when action is necessary and the correct response is obvious, but also when action is unnecessary, when the correct response is not clear, and when restraint is required. The knowledge that power can reduce perspective-taking and lead to objectification might also be useful for leaders who want to maintain positive relations with those who support them. That is, power may have opposing effects on two dimensions typically associated with being a leader: Power may attenuate feelings of responsibility for others, on the one hand, and accentuate the use of authority on the other. Surely, bringing responsibility to the forefront of consciousness must be required to maintain a leadership position, especially in an unstable social system. Leaders who recognize and learn to manage their own power are the most successful (Pfeffer, 1992).

The way in which a leader acts is often taken as a reflection of a dispositionally determined leadership style (Bass & Avolio, 1993; House & Shamir, 1993; Peterson, 1997; Simonton, 1988). However, a focus on leadership styles neglects the possibility that the leadership role is a strong
situation, one that affects cognition and behavior in ways that are both consistent and inconsistent with effective leadership. Most leaders assume their positions with the noblest of intentions, but, as we have shown here, their power can get the best of them. Power is also crucial for effective leadership. Therefore, it would be a mistake to conclude from this discussion that leaders must somehow compromise their power. Our point in making these arguments is to suggest that to understand leadership behavior, it is important to consider the psychological effects of power on the leader.

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