

Power Increases Perceptions of Others' Choices, Leading People to Blame Others More

Social Psychological and
Personality Science
1-8

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/19485506211016140

journals.sagepub.com/home/spp



Yidan Yin¹ , Krishna Savani² , and Pamela K. Smith¹

Abstract

Under what circumstances do people adopt a choice mindset? Three studies (two preregistered) tested whether higher power leads people to construe others as having more choice. When power was either measured (Study 1) or manipulated (Studies 2 and 3), high-power perceivers viewed others, even low-power others (Study 3), as having more choice than did low-power perceivers. Consequently, high-power individuals blamed others more for poor performance (Studies 1–3), and were more likely to punish them (Studies 1 and 2). The findings document a direct link between power and choice by showing that the psychological consequences of a choice mindset (i.e., greater blame) can be evoked by power and that effects of power (e.g., on blame) can be mediated by perceptions of choice.

Keywords

power, choice, agency, blame

When people observe someone engaging in an action—making coffee, driving a car, protesting—they may construe this action as a choice. A choice is a deliberate action that likely reflects the actor's preferences, intentions, and motives. A tendency to view one's own and others' actions as a matter of choice is known as a choice mindset (Madan et al., 2020). Being in a choice mindset changes how individuals think, feel, and act. They become more likely to blame victims of negative events and are less disturbed by information about inequality (Savani & Rattan, 2012; Savani et al., 2011). They also feel more agentic (Feldman et al., 2014).

Given the many consequences of a choice mindset (Madan et al., 2020), it is crucial to understand what leads people to adopt one. In this research, we investigate a novel antecedent of a choice mindset: a person's power. As choice is a means of experiencing and exercising agency, we propose that high-power individuals are more likely to construe others' actions as choices and to perceive others as having more choice than low-power individuals. Thus, high-power individuals should also be more likely to blame others for poor performance.

Power and Choice

In line with recent research, we define power as control over valuable resources (Fiske, 2010; Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Smith, 2013). Power may be conceptualized as both a structural variable based on a person's actual control over resources, and a psychological state known as a sense of power (Smith & Hofmann, 2016; Tost & Johnson, 2019). The relationship

between power and choice is multifaceted. When researchers defined choice as the number of options a person has, they found that power and choice were substitutes. Both fulfill people's desire for control, so when people lack power, they want to have more options, and when people lack options, they want to have more power (Inesi et al., 2011).

However, the subjective perception of choice—the belief that one has multiple options to pick from—is not based solely on the objective number of options available (Savani et al., 2010). People may construe any action as a choice, as long as they believe that there is an alternative action: Maria may construe driving to work as a choice if she believes taking a cab is a viable alternative. Similarly, people may not construe their action as a choice, even when they objectively have multiple options: If Maria thinks taking a cab to work is too expensive, she may not construe driving to work as a choice, although objectively she has alternatives.

In the current research, we focus on how power affects people's subjective perceptions of choice. We extend the scope of research on power and choice beyond the self to perceptions of

¹Rady School of Management, University of California—San Diego, La Jolla, CA, USA

²Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Corresponding Author:

Yidan Yin, Rady School of Management, University of California San Diego, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA.

Email: yidan.yin@rady.ucsd.edu

others. As more power comes with greater control over what happens to others, it is important to understand how power affects the way people perceive and act toward others. Thus, we ask: When choice is conceptualized as a subjective perception, does power increase or decrease people's perception of others' choice?

We predict that high-power individuals will perceive others to have more choice than low-power individuals do. First, high-power individuals ignore environmental constraints more than low-power individuals (Fast et al., 2009; Galinsky et al., 2008; Whitson et al., 2013). As fewer constraints imply greater choice (Kricheli-Katz, 2013), individuals with higher power should believe that everyone has more choice. Second, just as people often project their own mental states onto others (Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996; Robbins & Krueger, 2005), both high-power and low-power individuals can project their own perceptions of choice onto others. Because high-power individuals perceive themselves to have greater choice than do low-power individuals (Galinsky et al., 2008), high-power individuals should also perceive others as having more choice than low-power individuals do.

A choice is a deliberate action, so construing others' behavior as a choice likely highlights their agency, making the behavior seem more intentional and controllable. Given that people place more blame on a perpetrator when the violation is more intentional and controllable (Alicke, 2000; Malle et al., 2014; Monroe & Malle, 2017), we predict that high-power people will be more likely than low-power people to hold others responsible for their actions. Indeed, people in a choice mindset are more likely to blame victims for their plight (Savani et al., 2011) and less likely to support policies addressing inequality (Savani & Rattan, 2012). As high-power individuals have more control over valued resources, their attribution of responsibility and assignment of blame carry greater weight and often impact punishment decisions.

The Present Research

Using either a sense of power measure (Study 1) or structural power manipulations (Studies 2 and 3), we tested whether high-power individuals, relative to low-power individuals, were more likely to blame and even punish others as a result of perceiving others to have more choice. Across all studies, we report all participants, experimental conditions, and measures related to power and choice. Additional measures are reported in the Supplemental Material. Data, code, and materials in all studies are available via the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/shryd/?view_only=4312a66d707e4d418ccf83c94b7cd921).

Study 1

To make participants feel their responses were consequential, in Study 1, we told them that we were crowdsourcing solutions to a real workplace problem in which an employee did not complete some work. We measured participants' sense of power

and assessed their perception of the employee's choice, their tendency to blame that person for their behavior, and their willingness to punish that person.

Method

The methods and analyses for this study were preregistered at <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=ea3n64>.

Participants

This was a replication of part of a previously conducted study (Supplemental Experiment 3). As we expected a positive correlation between sense of power and blame, we conducted a power analysis using one-tailed tests. A power analysis using $r = .13$ (the correlation between sense of power and blame in the previous study) and $\alpha = .05$ (one-tailed) indicated that 365 participants were needed to achieve 80% power. Thus, we posted a study seeking 365 U.S. resident participants on Prolific. In response, 366 U.S. residents completed the study. Of these, three participants who did not pass an attention check were excluded from the analyses, leaving 363 valid participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.64$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.14$; 194 women and 169 men).

Procedure

At the beginning of the study, participants were told that they would complete several short surveys linked together for convenience. There were two surveys, the sense of power survey and the blame survey, presented in a random order to reduce demand effects.

In the sense of power survey, participants completed the eight-item "sense of power scale" (Anderson et al., 2012; sample item: "I can get others to do what I want"). They responded on unnumbered 7-point scales labeled from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The items were averaged to form a measure of participants' sense of power ($\alpha = .90$).

In the blame survey, we told participants:

A recent situation happened in our university department, and we decided to take the novel approach of asking folks on Prolific what they think. We figure that as we crowdsource so much else, why not crowdsource the solution to this issue too! Our department is in the process of giving employees bonuses at the end of the year. The decision-making process had been smooth until we got to the case of L.R., one of the administrative assistants.

L.R. was assigned to prepare and submit paperwork for a research grant, but she did not complete the work. L.R. explained that she had no choice but to not complete the work as she was caught up in other work. In the end, L.R.'s coworker filled in for her and submitted the paperwork before the deadline.

All participants were then informed that the committee had been unable to reach consensus on the issue. Because most committee members already posted surveys to Prolific regularly, they decided to crowdsource the solution to Prolific. The

decision of whether to give L.R. the year-end bonus would be determined by how the majority of participants voted.

Participants next answered questions about L.R. We measured participants' perception of L.R.'s choice using two items: (1) "Do you agree or disagree with what L.R. said that she had no choice but to not complete the work assigned to her" (reverse coded) and (2) "Do you agree or disagree that L.R. had a choice about whether to complete the work assigned to her" ($\alpha = .60$). Participants answered the questions on unnumbered 7-point scales labeled from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. We measured the extent to which participants blamed L.R. using the following two items: (1) "To what extent do you think L.R. should be held responsible for not completing the work assigned to her" and (2) "To what extent do you think L.R. is to blame for not completing the work assigned to her" ($\alpha = .91$). Participants answered the questions on unnumbered 7-point scales labeled from *not at all* to *extremely*. Last, we asked participants, "Should we give L.R. the bonus?" Participants answered this question on an unnumbered 7-point scale labeled from *definitely no* to *definitely yes*.

As an attention check, participants were asked whether L.R. did not complete the work assigned to her or filled in for her coworker. Participants who answered incorrectly were excluded from the analyses. Finally, to probe suspicion, we asked participants: Did you believe that the scenario about L.R. that you read about described a real-life issue? Participants answered either *yes* or *no*.

Results

Based on our preregistered analysis plan, we used one-tailed t tests and 90% confidence intervals (CIs) to test our hypotheses.

As predicted, participants with a higher sense of power perceived L.R. to have more choice, $r(361) = .14$, $t(361) = 2.78$, $p = .003$ (one-tailed), blamed L.R. more, $r(361) = .13$, $t(361) = 2.60$, $p = .005$ (one-tailed), and were less likely to vote to give L.R. a bonus, $r(361) = -.16$, $t(361) = -3.06$, $p = .001$ (one-tailed). Participants who perceived L.R. to have more choice blamed L.R. more, $r(361) = .54$, $t(361) = 12.17$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed) and were less likely to vote to give L.R. a bonus, $r(361) = -.43$, $t(361) = -9.06$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed). Finally, participants who blamed L.R. more were less likely to vote to give L.R. a bonus, $r(361) = -.70$, $t(361) = -18.38$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed).

As planned, we tested whether the previous results would hold after excluding participants who did not believe the scenario about L.R. described a real-life issue ($N = 117$). Among participants who believed the scenario described a real-life issue ($N = 246$), those with a higher sense of power perceived L.R. to have more choice, $r(244) = .15$, $t(244) = 2.31$, $p = .01$ (one-tailed), blamed L.R. more, $r(244) = .18$, $t(244) = 2.78$, $p = .003$ (one-tailed), and were less likely to vote to give L.R. a bonus, $r(244) = -.13$, $t(244) = -2.00$, $p = .02$ (one-tailed). Participants who perceived L.R. to have more choice blamed L.R. more, $r(244) = .52$, $t(244) = 9.43$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed), and were less likely to vote to give L.R. a bonus,

$r(277) = -.40$, $t(277) = -6.76$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed). Finally, participants who blamed L.R. more were less likely to vote to give L.R. a bonus, $r(244) = -.72$, $t(244) = -15.98$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed).

Mediation Analyses

As planned, we conducted serial mediation analyses using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013; Model 6), with participants' sense of power as the independent variable, perception of L.R.'s choice as the first mediator, blaming her as the second mediator, and giving her a bonus as the dependent variable. With the full sample of 363 participants, the serial mediation was significant, indirect effect = $-.06$, 90% CI $[-.11, -.02]$, indicating that participants with a higher sense of power were more likely to perceive L.R. to have a choice, which was positively related to blaming her, which was negatively related to giving her a bonus.

After excluding participants who did not believe the scenario described a real-life issue, the serial mediation was still significant, indirect effect = $-.06$, 90% CI $[-.12, -.01]$.

Study 2

In Study 1, when a target person did something blameworthy, people with a higher sense of power were more likely to perceive her as having a choice, blame her, and even punish her. Study 2 built on these findings. Instead of measuring participants' sense of power, we altered participants' structural power by placing them in low- or high-power roles. Participants then learned about a target who performed poorly on a task. We measured how much choice participants thought the target had and how much they blamed them. Similar to Study 1, we also included a behavioral consequence of blame: whether participants chose to punish the target for poor performance by withholding payment.

Method

Participants

A power analysis using Cohen's $d = .30$ (taken from Supplemental Experiment 2), $\alpha = .05$ (two-tailed), indicated that 176 participants per condition were needed to achieve 80% power. A survey seeking 400 U.S. residents was posted on Amazon Mechanical Turk. To make our cover story believable, only individuals who had completed between 50 and 10,000 human intelligence tasks (HITs) on MTurk were able to view and sign up for the study. Participants' dropout rates did not differ significantly between the two power conditions, $\chi^2(1) = .95$, $p = .33$, so differential dropout rates did not pose a confound (Zhou & Fishbach, 2016).

Of the 406 participants who completed the study, 13 participants did not pass the attention check and were excluded from the analyses, leaving 393 valid participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.77$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.41$; 229 women and 164 men). Participants

were randomly assigned to either the low-power or high-power condition.

Procedure

At the beginning of the study, participants were asked to indicate how many HITs they had completed. The study was introduced as being about organizational behavior. Participants were told that they were in a group with two other participants and that this group consisted of two teams. Team A was a two-person team with one supervisor and one worker who would work on a ranking task. Team B had one member who would transcribe an audio recording. The supervisor in Team A would only be in charge of the worker in Team A, not the transcriber in Team B. To simulate collaboration across teams, Team A would also read and summarize Team B's transcription.

In fact, all participants were assigned to Team A. The team's task was to rank in order of importance a list of tips about effective usage of MTurk. In the low-power condition, participants were told that they were assigned to the role of worker because they had less MTurk experience than the other member of Team A, who had completed 21,076 HITs. In the high-power condition, participants were told that they were assigned to the role of supervisor because they had more MTurk experience than the other member of Team A, who had completed five HITs. Participants were told that the supervisor would direct and evaluate the worker's work, and this evaluation would determine how much bonus the worker would receive.

Before they did the ranking task, participants were asked to summarize the main idea in Team B's transcription. They were presented with the transcription and told that the transcriber had 3 min to transcribe a 30-s audio recording. There were several grammatical and spelling errors in the transcription. We also showed participants a message that the transcriber sent to Team A: "Sorry about the errors . . . My internet connection is unstable today. There was an internet glitch and I ran out of time . . ."

Participants then answered questions about the transcriber's work. We measured perception of choice using the item: "The transcriber had a choice about whether to make errors in the transcription." We measured blame using the following two items: (1) "The transcriber should be held responsible for the errors in the transcription" and (2) "The transcriber is to blame for errors in the transcription" ($\alpha = .90$). All the above items were measured on unnumbered 7-point scales labeled from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Next, as a behavioral consequence of blame, we asked participants if this work should be rejected as a punishment of the transcriber (*yes* or *no*). Participants believed that rejecting the work meant the transcriber would not receive payment for transcribing the audio.

As a manipulation check, participants were asked "how much power do you have in the team." Participants responded on a 9-point scale (0 = *none at all*, 8 = *very much*). Finally, as an attention check, they were asked whether they were assigned to the role of supervisor, worker, or transcriber. Participants

who failed the attention check were excluded from the analyses.

Results

Manipulation Check

Our manipulation of power was successful: participants in the supervisor role ($M = 6.25$, 95% CI [6.02, 6.48], $SD = 1.67$) indicated that they had more power than those in the worker role ($M = 2.76$, 95% CI [2.50, 3.02], $SD = 1.82$), $t(391) = 19.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.00$.

Perception of Choice

High-power participants ($M = 4.63$, 95% CI [4.40, 4.87], $SD = 1.69$) perceived the transcriber to have more choice than low-power participants ($M = 4.25$, 95% CI [4.01, 4.49], $SD = 1.68$), $t(391) = 2.24$, $p = .026$, $d = .23$.

Blame

High-power participants ($M = 5.00$, 95% CI [4.82, 5.19], $SD = 1.36$) blamed the transcriber more than low-power participants ($M = 4.55$, 95% CI [4.34, 4.76], $SD = 1.47$), $t(391) = 3.16$, $p = .002$, $d = .32$.

Punishment

High-power participants (39.3%) were more likely to punish the transcriber by rejecting their work than low-power participants (25.0%), $\chi^2(df = 1) = 8.54$, $p = .003$, $d = .33$.

Mediation Analyses

To test whether perception of the transcriber's choice mediated the effect of power on punishment, we conducted a bootstrapped mediation analysis (with 5,000 resamples) using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013; Model 4). Perception of the transcriber's choice significantly mediated the effect of power on punishment, indirect effect = .13, 95% CI [.02, .29], indicating that power increased perception of the transcriber's choice, which increased the likelihood of punishing them.

We also tested a serial mediation model using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013; Model 6). Power condition was the independent variable, perception of the transcriber's choice the first mediator, blaming them the second mediator, and punishing them the dependent variable. The serial indirect effect path was also significant, indirect effect = .18, 95% CI [.02, .38], indicating that power increased perception of choice, which increased blame and then the likelihood of punishing the transcriber.

Study 3

Study 3 aimed to replicate the effects of power on choice and blame in Studies 1 and 2 using another structural power manipulation. Further, we tested whether these effects held when the target person's level of power in the group was specified.

Method

The methods and analyses for this study were preregistered at <http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=k4s3uy>.

Participants

A power analysis using Cohen's $d = .31$ (the average effect of power on blame in Study 2 and Supplemental Experiment 2), $\alpha = .05$ (two-tailed), indicated that 165 participants per condition were needed to achieve 80% power. To allow for potential attention check failures, we set a minimum sample size of 350. The study was run in the lab at a public university for 1 week, during which 385 undergraduate students participated.

Thirty-three participants did not pass the attention check and were excluded from the analyses, leaving 352 valid participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.07$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.56$; 162 women and 190 men). Participants were randomly assigned to either the low-power or high-power condition.

Procedure

First, participants were asked to complete a leadership questionnaire. Participants were then told that the study was about organizational behavior and that they were in a group with two other participants. There were three roles in the group as follows: manager, Subordinate A, and Subordinate B.

Participants were told that the role assignment would be based on their responses in the leadership questionnaire, so that the person with the most leadership experience would be the manager. In fact, participants were randomly assigned to be either the manager or Subordinate A. They were told that they would complete two tasks in the study. The first task was an individual task and the second task was a group task, in which their group would work on a decision-making problem. The manager in the group would have control over the number of solutions the subordinates need to propose and decide how long the subordinates needed to work on the group task. The manager would also evaluate the subordinates' performance in the group task.

In the individual task, participants solved 10 easy three-letter anagrams. Afterward, participants were given a chance to write down any comments they had about the task. Next, they saw the performance of the other two people in the group, whose individual task involved adding two-digit numbers (e.g., $86 + 36 = ?$). The target person, Subordinate B, got six questions right and four wrong. Depending on the participant's role assignment, the other person was either Subordinate A or the manager, and this other person got all 10 questions right. Subordinate B's comment on the task was also shown to participants: "sorry about the mistakes. I didn't get much sleep last night and wasn't thinking clearly . . ."

Participants then answered questions about Subordinate B's performance. We measured perception of Subordinate B's choice using the following two items: (1) "Subordinate B had a choice about whether to make mistakes in the addition task"

and (2) "It was subordinate B's choice to make mistakes in the addition task" ($\alpha = .66$). We measured blame using two items as follows: (1) "Subordinate B should be held responsible for making mistakes in the addition task" and (2) "Subordinate B is to blame for making mistakes in the addition task" ($\alpha = .66$). All the above items were measured on unnumbered 7-point scales labeled from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

As a manipulation check, participants were asked to indicate how much power they had in the group. Finally, as an attention check, they were asked whether they were assigned to the role of the manager, Subordinate A, or Subordinate B. Participants who answered incorrectly were excluded from the analyses.

Results

Manipulation Check

Our manipulation of power was successful: participants assigned to be the manager ($M = 5.45$, 95% CI [5.18, 5.72], $SD = 1.85$) indicated they had more power than those assigned to be the subordinate ($M = 2.69$, 95% CI [2.38, 2.99], $SD = 2.04$), $t(350) = 13.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.42$.

Perception of Target's Choice

Participants in the high-power role ($M = 4.18$, 95% CI [4.00, 4.36], $SD = 1.21$) perceived Subordinate B to have more choice than those in the low-power role ($M = 3.88$, 95% CI [3.70, 4.07], $SD = 1.24$), $t(350) = 2.29$, $p = .023$, $d = .24$.

Blame

Participants in the high-power role ($M = 4.99$, 95% CI [4.83, 5.15], $SD = 1.07$) blamed Subordinate B more than those in the low-power role ($M = 4.66$, 95% CI [4.48, 4.84], $SD = 1.20$), $t(350) = 2.76$, $p = .006$, $d = .30$.

Mediation Analyses

To test whether perception of Subordinate B's choice mediated the effect of power on blaming them, we conducted a bootstrapped mediation analysis (with 5,000 resamples) using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013; Model 4) with perception of Subordinate B's choice as the mediator, power role as the independent variable, and blaming Subordinate B as the dependent variable. Perception of Subordinate B's choice significantly mediated the effect of power on blame, indirect effect = .09, 95% CI [.02, .19], indicating that power increased perception of choice, which increased blame.

General Discussion

Across three studies, when we either measured sense of power or manipulated structural power, we consistently found that high-power individuals perceived others to have more choice and blamed others more than did low-power individuals. This effect cannot be explained by high-power individuals blaming

and punishing those below them just to maintain their own position, as it occurred even when the target person was not part of the hierarchy (Studies 1 and 2). Three additional studies reported in the Supplemental Material provide further support for the links between power, perception of others' choice, and blame.

Although choice and control are both related to agency, they are distinct and divergent in our studies. For example, in Study 2, though the transcriber had little control over external factors (e.g., the internet), they still had a choice about what work they submitted. People can feel that a person has a choice, even if that person has little control over their circumstances. In this way, our work moves beyond the relation between power and control.

This research makes several contributions to the literature on power and choice. First, a recent experience sampling study found that both people's structural power and their sense of power vary over time (Smith & Hofmann, 2016). Thus, our findings suggest that people's perception of others' choice, attribution of responsibility, and assignment of blame may fluctuate with their power across different situations. Understanding how power affects perceptions of others is especially important as those with more power have more influence on the outcomes of others.

Second, our research builds on past findings that having power increases people's perception of their own choice (Galinsky et al., 2008) by demonstrating that power can also increase people's perception of others' choice. Future research could explore whether the link between power and choice is bidirectional, similar to the relationship between power and abstract thinking (Smith & Trope, 2006; Smith et al., 2008; Wakslak et al., 2014). For example, one could test whether framing someone's behavior as a choice will increase their perceived power.

Finally, the current research suggests that perceiving others to have more choice can serve as a novel explanation for why high-power individuals punish others more than low-power individuals (Mooijman et al., 2015). Our finding also suggests another mechanism through which high-power people justify the status quo: Compared with low-power people, high-power people should be more likely to attribute their own and others' positions to personal choices, thus seeing the current hierarchy as more justified (Savani & Rattan, 2012). Finally, in negotiations, another way high-power people may achieve better outcomes is by ignoring others' ultimatums because they perceive others to have more choice (Ma et al., 2019).

The present studies raise new questions for future research. For example, our two experiments (Studies 2 and 3) examined the effects of putting participants in relatively low- and high-power positions. However, people can also feel like they have the same amount of power as others (i.e., equal power) or be in the middle of a hierarchy rather than at the top or bottom (i.e., middle power). Would we expect such levels of power to have an effect on choice perceptions somewhere in between high and low power? After all, power can have curvilinear effects: Schaerer et al. (2018) found that high-power and low-power

people both objectified others more than those with equal power. Although we did not have an equal or middle power condition in Studies 2 and 3, in Study 1, we had a continuous measure of sense of power; here, we found no evidence of a curvilinear relationship between sense of power and perception of choice, $p = .40$ (tested using a quadratic term of sense of power). This finding suggests that the choice perceptions of people with middle power fell between those with low power and high power. Future research should test if this finding also holds for people with equal power, such as with a structural role manipulation.

Another question is whether high power also leads people to give others more credit than low power. People are more sensitive to contextual factors when assigning blame than assigning credit (Bostyn & Roets, 2016; Pizarro et al., 2003). For example, Pizarro et al. (2003) found that people took controllability of an action into account when assigning blame but not when assigning credit. If people are less sensitive to contextual factors when assigning credit, people may not take the target's choice into account when assigning credit. In Supplemental Experiment 3, we provided some preliminary evidence that individuals' higher sense of power may not be associated with assigning more credit to others. When a target person did something praiseworthy, people with a higher sense of power still perceived her as having more choice, but their sense of power was unrelated to giving her credit or a bonus.

Our findings suggest that in the workplace, managers and subordinates may differ in their views of blameworthiness and punishment. The size of this effect may be small ($r = .13$; though typical for social psychology), but because people at different levels of power regularly interact at work, it is likely to be consequential over time (Funder & Ozer, 2019). As subordinates see others as having less choice and thus blame them less than powerholders do, they may perceive their managers as punishing others unfairly. Powerholders should thus keep in mind how much more choice they have than their subordinates, especially when evaluating them. For example, before blaming someone for mistakes or poor performance, managers should consider whether they are overestimating how much choice that person had. Ensuring all parties have similar perceptions of the person's choice will make it more likely that punishments are seen as justified.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Yidan Yin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2037-1901>

Krishna Savani  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6934-1917>

Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

References

- Alicke, M. D. (2000). Culpable control and the psychology of blame. *Psychological Bulletin*, *126*(4), 556.
- Anderson, C., John, O. P., & Keltner, D. (2012). The personal sense of power. *Journal of Personality*, *80*(2), 313–344.
- Bostyn, D. H., & Roets, A. (2016). The morality of action: The asymmetry between judgments of praise and blame in the action–omission effect. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *63*, 19–25.
- Cadinu, M. R., & Rothbart, M. (1996). Self-anchoring and differentiation processes in the minimal group setting. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*(4), 661.
- Fast, N. J., Gruenfeld, D. H., Sivanathan, N., & Galinsky, A. D. (2009). Illusory control: A generative force behind power's far-reaching effects. *Psychological Science*, *20*(4), 502–508.
- Feldman, G., Baumeister, R. F., & Wong, K. F. E. (2014). Free will is about choosing: The link between choice and the belief in free will. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *55*, 239–245.
- Fiske, S. T. (2010). Interpersonal stratification: Status, power, and subordination. In S. T. Fiske, D. T. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 941–982). John Wiley & Sons.
- Funder, D. C., & Ozer, D. J. (2019). Evaluating effect size in psychological research: Sense and nonsense. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*, *2*(2), 156–168.
- Galinsky, A. D., Magee, J. C., Gruenfeld, D. H., Whitson, J. A., & Liljenquist, K. A. (2008). Power reduces the press of the situation: Implications for creativity, conformity, and dissonance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *95*(6), 1450–1466.
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Methodology in the social sciences. Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach*. Guilford Press.
- Inesi, M. E., Botti, S., Dubois, D., Rucker, D. D., & Galinsky, A. D. (2011). Power and choice: Their dynamic interplay in quenching the thirst for personal control. *Psychological Science*, *22*(8), 1042–1048.
- Keltner, D., Gruenfeld, D. H., & Anderson, C. (2003). Power, approach, and inhibition. *Psychological Review*, *110*(2), 265.
- Kricheli-Katz, T. (2013). Choice-based discrimination: Labor-force-type discrimination against gay men, the obese, and mothers. *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*, *10*(4), 670–695.
- Ma, A., Yang, Y., & Savani, K. (2019). “Take it or leave it!” A choice mindset leads to greater persistence and better outcomes in negotiations. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *153*, 1–12.
- Madan, S., Nanakdewa, K., Savani, K., & Markus, H. R. (2020). The paradoxical consequences of choice: Often good for the individual, perhaps less so for society? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *29*(1), 80–85.
- Magee, J. C., & Smith, P. K. (2013). The social distance theory of power. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *17*(2), 158–186.
- Malle, B. F., Guglielmo, S., & Monroe, A. E. (2014). A theory of blame. *Psychological Inquiry*, *25*(2), 147–186.
- Monroe, A. E., & Malle, B. F. (2017). Two paths to blame: Intentionality directs moral information processing along two distinct tracks. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *146*(1), 123.
- Mooijman, M., Van Dijk, W. W., Ellemers, N., & Van Dijk, E. (2015). Why leaders punish: A power perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *109*(1), 75.
- Pizarro, D., Uhlmann, E., & Salovey, P. (2003). Asymmetry in judgments of moral blame and praise: The role of perceived metadesires. *Psychological Science*, *14*(3), 267–272.
- Robbins, J. M., & Krueger, J. I. (2005). Social projection to ingroups and outgroups: A review and meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *9*(1), 32–47.
- Savani, K., Markus, H. R., Naidu, N. V. R., Kumar, S., & Berlia, N. (2010). What counts as a choice? US Americans are more likely than Indians to construe actions as choices. *Psychological Science*, *21*(3), 391–398.
- Savani, K., & Rattan, A. (2012). A choice mind-set increases the acceptance and maintenance of wealth inequality. *Psychological Science*, *23*(7), 796–804.
- Savani, K., Stephens, N. M., & Markus, H. R. (2011). The unanticipated interpersonal and societal consequences of choice: Victim blaming and reduced support for the public good. *Psychological Science*, *22*(6), 795–802.
- Schaerer, M., du Plessis, C., Yap, A. J., & Thau, S. (2018). Low power individuals in social power research: A quantitative review, theoretical framework, and empirical test. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *149*, 73–96.
- Smith, P. K., & Hofmann, W. (2016). Power in everyday life. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *113*(36), 10043–10048.
- Smith, P. K., & Trope, Y. (2006). You focus on the forest when you're in charge of the trees: Power priming and abstract information processing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*(4), 578–596.
- Smith, P. K., Wigboldus, D. H. J., & Dijksterhuis, A. (2008). Abstract thinking increases one's sense of power. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *44*, 378–385.
- Tost, L. P., & Johnson, H. H. (2019). The prosocial side of power: How structural power over subordinates can promote social responsibility. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *152*, 25–46.
- Wakslak, C. J., Smith, P. K., & Han, A. (2014). Using abstract language signals power. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *107*, 41–55.
- Whitson, J. A., Liljenquist, K. A., Galinsky, A. D., Magee, J. C., Gruenfeld, D. H., & Cadena, B. (2013). The blind leading: Power reduces awareness of constraints. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *49*(3), 579–582.
- Zhou, H., & Fishbach, A. (2016). The pitfall of experimenting on the web: How unattended selective attrition leads to surprising (yet false) research conclusions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *111*(4), 493.

Author Biographies

Yidan Yin is a PhD candidate in the Rady School of Management at the University of California, San Diego. Through her research, she seeks to provide guidance for individuals who want to be more effective at work and identify barriers to empowerment.

Krishna Savani is the Provost's Chair in Business and the Director of the Culture Science Innovations Centre at Nanyang Technological

University, Singapore. He uses crosscultural research to uncover basic psychological processes that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Pamela K. Smith is an associate professor of management in the Rady School of Management at the University of California, San Diego. Her research focuses on power, status, and influence, both their causes and consequences.

Handling Editor: Igor Grossmann