Research Report

Psychological Science
2016, Vol. 27(12) 1660–1666

DOI: 10.1177/0956797616669947
pss.sagepub.com

From Power to Inaction: Ambivalence Gives Pause to the Powerful

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Abstract

Research has shown that people who feel powerful are more likely to act than those who feel powerless, whereas people who feel ambivalent are less likely to act than those whose reactions are univalent (entirely positive or entirely negative). But what happens when powerful people also are ambivalent? On the basis of the self-validation theory of judgment, we hypothesized that power and ambivalence would interact to predict individuals' action. Because power can validate individuals' reactions, we reasoned that feeling powerful strengthens whatever reactions people have during a decision. It can strengthen univalent reactions and increase action orientation, as shown in past research. Among people who hold an ambivalent judgment, however, those who feel powerful would be less action oriented than those who feel powerless. Two experiments provide evidence for this hypothesized interactive effect of power and ambivalence on individuals' action tendencies during both positive decisions (promoting an employee; Experiment 1) and negative decisions (firing an employee; Experiment 2). In summary, when individuals' reactions are ambivalent, power increases the likelihood of inaction.

Keywords

power, ambivalence, self-validation, action, decision time, open data

Received 2/8/16; Revision accepted 8/25/16

Feeling powerful leads to action (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003), whether for good or for bad (e.g., helping, cheating; Côté et al., 2011; Yap, Wazlawek, Lucas, Cuddy, & Carney, 2013). In contrast, ambivalence leads to inaction, especially when a relevant decision is impending (e.g., van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009). So, what happens when someone feels both powerful and ambivalent? Surprisingly, established research is silent on this question.

Inspired by the *self-validation theory* of judgment (Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007; DeMarree, Briñol, & Petty, 2014; Petty, Briñol, & Tormala, 2002), we predicted that power would validate whatever thoughts participants had at the moment of a decision, be they univalent or ambivalent. Specifically, the self-validation perspective on power suggests that when individuals' thoughts are consistently positive or consistently negative, those with high power would be more likely to act than those with low power because of the greater confidence powerful people have in their judgments. However, when individuals' thoughts are instead *ambivalent*—both positive and negative—power should have the opposite effect on action. That is, if power validates individuals' ambivalent reactions (based on objectively mixed information), more powerful people would trust their ambivalence more and behave accordingly. This magnification effect (Clarkson, Tormala, & Rucker, 2008; Luttrell, Petty, & Briñol, 2016; Petty, Briñol, Tormala, & Wegener, 2007) would translate into powerful people acting less decisively and more slowly than powerless people when they are ambivalent.

Although some studies have shown that the powerful can attend more flexibly to goal-relevant aspects of their situation than the powerless can (Overbeck & Park, 2006) and that the powerful can think before acting as much as the powerless when increased thinking prior to a difficult

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task is presumed to be beneficial for their performance (Scholl & Sassenberg, 2015), the hypothesis that higher power can lead to greater hesitation to act among people who are clearly ambivalent has never been tested empirically. This is a critical gap in the literature, given that high-power people often find themselves faced with decisions regarding options that elicit ambivalent reactions (Plambeck & Weber, 2009). Indeed, the classic anecdotal example of consequential inaction is "old sergeant syndrome" (Janis & Mann, 1977), in which a commanding officer is stalled by decision conflict, failing to take any timely action to protect subordinate troops. In this case, the costs of power interacting with ambivalence would be measured in casualties.

Thus, the goal of the present research was to examine the interactive effect of power and ambivalence on individuals' action tendencies during decision making. In accord with the self-validation perspective, we predicted that feeling more powerful would translate into a greater propensity for action when individuals' reactions were univalent, as has been found in prior research. However, when individuals' reactions were ambivalent, we expected that feeling more powerful would translate into a greater propensity for *in*action. Our first experiment focused on a positive decision outcome (promotion of an employee) and was designed as an initial test of these predictions. Our procedure was modeled on previous studies of power and action (Galinsky et al., 2003) and power and validation (Briñol et al., 2007). We conducted a second, conceptually identical, experiment to replicate and expand on these findings within a negative decision context (firing an employee). Thus, in each study, we manipulated (a) whether participants had ambivalent or univalent information about a target and (b) whether they felt relatively powerful or powerless going into the decision. In accord with recommended approaches to analyzing multiple studies through combined analyses (Schimmack, 2012), we collapsed the data from the two independently conducted experiments while accounting for experiment as a factor in the analyses. We submitted participants' preferences for inaction toward promoting (Experiment 1) or firing (Experiment 2) the employee and their actual behavior—amount of time taken to render a decision—to the same 2 (employee profile: univalent vs. ambivalent) × 2 (power: low vs. high) × 2 (experiment: 1 vs. 2) between-participants analyses of variance (ANOVAs).

Method

Participants, design, and procedure

One hundred twenty-nine undergraduates and 197 undergraduates were recruited for Experiment 1 and Experiment 2, respectively. They were told that the experiments were about person perception in the job market and that in exchange for their participation they would receive course credit in their introductory psychology classes. The target sample size for Experiment 1 was 120 participants; recruitment was terminated when it appeared that the target would be met or exceeded in a given week. This sample size was selected to be consistent with relevant prior research on psychological power, which has typically had 20 to 40 participants per cell (e.g., Briñol et al., 2007; Galinsky et al., 2003). The target sample size for Experiment 2 was 180 participants, so that the experiment would have statistical power of 80% to detect the interaction effect observed in Experiment 1. For both experiments, the show-up rate was higher than expected, so the sample sizes exceeded the targets. Three participants in Experiment 1 and 5 participants in Experiment 2 who appeared not to take the experiment seriously (by pressing the same response key throughout the experiment or taking less than 1 s to respond to questions) were excluded. Thus, analyses included 126 participants in Experiment 1 and 192 participants in Experiment 2.

Participants were randomly assigned to condition following a 2 (employee profile: ambivalent vs. univalent) × 2 (power: high vs. low) between-participants factorial design. The univalent profile was positive in Experiment 1 and negative in Experiment 2. Experiment (1 vs. 2) was included as a separate independent variable in the analyses to examine if the effects were different depending on whether the context was positive (promoting) or negative (firing).

As a cover story, participants were first informed that the study was being conducted with human-resources-management researchers at the Fisher College of Business at The Ohio State University. Participants were told that the main goal was to understand how people make decisions about employees. At this point, participants received information that was ostensibly about an actual employee. This information differed according to whether they were in the ambivalent or in the univalent condition.

After reading the employee's profile, participants were assigned to the power induction, which involved the most commonly used procedure for priming differences in perceived power—writing about a previous episode in which they had high or low power (Galinsky et al., 2003). Participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which they would prefer to wait to make a decision about the employee (i.e., preference for inaction). Regardless of their preference, they were subsequently prompted to make a promote-or-not decision (Experiment 1) or a fire-or-not decision (Experiment 2) about the employee, and the time to make this decision was recorded. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked. The following sections describe all manipulations and measures relevant to the

primary hypotheses (power, ambivalence, and inaction) that were included in the protocol.

Independent variables

Employee profile. Participants first read about 10 behaviors attributed to an employee, named "Bob"; these behaviors were adapted from previous work on person perception and impression formation (e.g., Rydell & Durso, 2012). Participants assigned to the univalent-profile condition read about 10 behaviors that were entirely positive (Experiment 1) or entirely negative (Experiment 2), whereas participants assigned to the ambivalent-profile condition read about 5 behaviors that were positive and 5 behaviors that were negative (see the Supplemental Material available online for the lists of behaviors for both experiments). Given previous research findings (e.g., Briñol, Petty, & Stavraki, 2012; Priester & Petty, 1996), participants in the univalent-profile condition were expected to have univalent thoughts about Bob (positive in Experiment 1 and negative in Experiment 2), whereas those in the ambivalent-profile condition were expected to have a mix of negative and positive thoughts about Bob and thus feel ambivalent.

Power induction. The power induction was included as a part of a "life events inventory." Participants were asked to write a brief essay about a supposedly randomly selected topic. In fact, they were asked to write about a time in the past when they had either high or low power over other people, depending on the condition to which they had been assigned (Galinsky et al., 2003). This seminal method of manipulating power experimentally was the first to avoid confounding felt power with structural power (Galinsky et al., 2003) and remains the most commonly used method of inducing feelings of power along a continuum from low to high (Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2015).

Dependent variables

Manipulation checks. Following the power-induction task in each experiment, participants' subjective ambivalence toward Bob was measured with three commonly used items. They rated the extent to which they felt conflicted about him (0 = *I am not at all conflicted*, 10 = *I feel maximum conflict*), felt undecided about him (0 = *I feel no indecision at all*, 10 = *I feel maximum indecision*), and had mixed reactions to him (0 = *I have completely one-sided reactions*, 10 = *I have completely mixed reactions*; Priester & Petty, 1996). These items were sufficiently reliable (α = .80), so responses to them were averaged to form a composite score of participants' subjective ambivalence.

In Experiment 2 only, we also included a check on the power manipulation. Participants rated how powerful, responsible, and powerless (reverse-scored) they felt after writing the essay, using scales from 1, *I did not feel powerful/responsible/powerless at all*, to 5, *I felt extremely powerful/responsible/powerless* (Galinsky et al., 2003). These items were sufficiently reliable (α = .76), so responses to them were averaged to form a composite score of participants' felt power.

Measures of inaction. Inaction is defined as any form of aversion to making a decision (Anderson, 2003). Thus, inaction can be measured by people's reports of the extent to which they would prefer to delay their decisions (e.g., Tversky & Shafir, 1992; Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998) as well as by the extent to which they actually do avoid taking action (e.g., Diederich, 2003; Luce, 1998). We measured participants' inaction in both ways. First, we assessed participants' subjective preference for inaction by asking, "If you had the opportunity to wait before making any decisions about Bob, how likely would you be to delay taking action?" The response scale ranged from 0, *I would make my decision immediately*, to 10, *I would delay the decision for as long as possible*.

Next, we operationalized participants' behavioral inaction as the amount of time (in seconds) they took to render a promote-or-not decision (Experiment 1) or a fire-or-not decision (Experiment 2). In Experiment 1, we asked participants, "Would you decide to promote Bob or not to promote Bob based on the given information?" The rating scale ranged from 1, *I would definitely NOT promote Bob*, to 7, *I would definitely promote Bob*. In Experiment 2, we asked participants, "Would you decide to fire Bob or not to fire Bob based on the given information?" The rating scale ranged from 1, *I would definitely NOT fire Bob*, to 7, *I would definitely fire Bob*. The time invested in making a decision provides a valuable and objective indicator of relative inaction; that is, longer decision times reflect the extent to which people actually avoid or delay making a decision given their relative preferences for inaction (Anderson, 2003; Diederich, 2003; Luce, 1998; Tversky & Shafir, 1992).

For this behavioral measure, we used the outlier-detection procedure recommended by Leys, Ley, Klein, Bernard, and Licata (2013), and identified participants whose decision times were unusually distant (according to their absolute median deviation) from the median decision time. This approach has the advantage of relying on a measure of central tendency (the median) and a measure of variance (the median absolute deviation) that are significantly less influenced by the outlying data themselves compared with the measures used in standard outlier-detection procedures (i.e., means and standard deviations). Because participants were not instructed

to decide quickly and were not otherwise constrained in their responses, we opted for a conservative exclusion criterion, a decision time more than 6 median absolute deviations from the median, so as to exclude as few participants as possible. This led to the exclusion of 1 participant in Experiment 1 and 4 participants in Experiment 2 who took longer than 18 s (> 4 *SD* from the average decision time) to make their decisions. After this exclusion, there were 125 participants in Experiment 1 and 188 participants in Experiment 2, for a combined sample of 313. (Analyses including outlying participants are presented in the Supplemental Material.)

Method summary

Overall, our experimental design had several advantages. First, our manipulations took place within a controlled lab setting, using methods that have been shown to make people feel more or less ambivalent (Bell & Esses, 2002; Priester & Petty, 1996; van Harreveld, Rutjens, Nordgren, & van der Pligt, 2009) and more or less powerful (Briñol et al., 2007; Galinsky et al., 2003). Second, we examined both participants' self-reports of whether they preferred action or inaction (Anderson, 2003; Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998) and the time they took (i.e., behavioral action tendency) to make a required decision (Anderson, 2003; Diederich, 2003; Galinsky et al., 2003; Luce, 1998; Tversky & Shafir, 1992). Finally, this design allowed a simultaneous test of the effects of power and ambivalence on action. Specifically, we predicted that higher felt power would lead to more action when information and thoughts were univalent, but to less action when information and thoughts were instead ambivalent (Briñol et al., 2007; Petty et al., 2002).

Results

Manipulation checks

Ratings of subjective ambivalence were available in both Experiment 1 and Experiment 2. Thus, this measure was submitted to a 2 (employee profile: univalent vs. ambivalent) × 2 (power: low vs. high) × 2 (experiment: 1 vs. 2) ANOVA. Only the predicted main effect of employee profile was found, $F(1, 305) = 168.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .356$; participants who read the ambivalent information reported significantly more ambivalence toward Bob ($M = 7.21$) than did those who read the univalent information ($M = 4.25$). The main effects of power and experiment and the interactions were not significant, Fs < 1, ps > .27.

Ratings of felt power were available only in Experiment 2, and thus these ratings were submitted to a 2 (employee profile: negative vs. ambivalent) × 2 (power: high vs. low) between-participants ANOVA. Only a main effect of the power induction was obtained, $F(1, 184) = 255.53$, $p < .001$. Participants who wrote about a time when they had high power reported feeling more powerful ($M = 3.83$) than did those who wrote about a time when they had low power ($M = 2.31$). Neither the profile manipulation nor the interaction significantly affected felt power, Fs < 1, ps > .5.

Multivariate analysis of inaction

We submitted both measures of participants' inaction to a 2 (employee profile: univalent vs. ambivalent) × 2 (power: low vs. high) × 2 (experiment: 1 vs. 2) multivariate analysis of variance. This analysis yielded a significant main effect of employee profile, $F(2, 304) = 41.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .214$, but this effect was qualified by the predicted interaction between employee profile and power, $F(2, 304) = 6.44$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .041$, which was not further moderated by experiment, $F(2, 304) = 0.08$, $p = .926$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$. The main effect of power was not by itself a significant predictor of inaction tendencies, $F(2, 304) = 0.87$, $p = .420$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$. The ANOVA results for each of the two measures of participants' inaction tendencies are described next.

Preference for inaction

The univariate 2 × 2 × 2 ANOVA on participants' preference for inaction yielded a significant main effect of employee profile, $F(1, 305) = 73.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .195$, but this effect was qualified by the predicted interaction of employee profile and power, $F(1, 305) = 10.74$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$ (Fig. 1). No other effects were significant, ps > .25.

Decomposing the interaction using simple-effects analyses revealed that when participants read the ambivalent profile, high power led to significantly higher preference for inaction ($M = 6.25$, $SD = 2.02$) than did low power ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 2.14$), $F(1, 142) = 8.47$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .056$, as we predicted on the basis of the self-validation theory. When participants read the univalent profile, high power tended instead to diminish preference for inaction ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.78$) compared with low power ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 2.31$), $F(1, 163) = 2.86$, $p = .093$, $\eta_p^2 = .017$; that is, in accord with past findings, the trend was for higher power to be associated with higher preference for action.

Behavioral measure of inaction

The univariate 2 × 2 × 2 ANOVA on participants' decision time similarly yielded a main effect of employee profile, $F(1, 305) = 22.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .068$, though, once again,

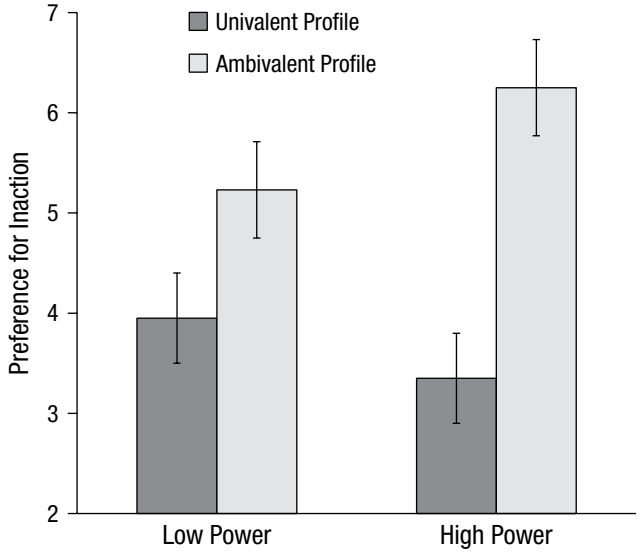

Fig. 1. Preference for inaction as a function of power (low vs. high) and employee profile (univalent vs. ambivalent). The graph shows results for the two experiments combined. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

this effect was qualified by the hypothesized interaction of employee profile and power, $F(1, 305) = 4.40$, $p = .037$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$ (Fig. 2).

Decomposing this interaction using simple-effects analyses revealed that when participants read the ambivalent profile, feeling powerful led to a significantly longer decision time ($M = 6.96$ s, $SD = 2.91$ s) than did feeling powerless ($M = 6.17$ s, $SD = 2.12$ s), $F(1, 142) = 4.11$, $p = .044$, $\eta_p^2 = .028$. These results demonstrate a significant reversal of the previously established effect of power on action. When given the univalent profile, however, high-power participants tended to respond more quickly ($M = 5.28$ s, $SD = 1.80$ s) than low-power participants ($M = 5.53$ s, $SD = 2.23$ s), $F(1, 163) = 0.64$, $p = .425$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$. This direction of effect is consistent with previous findings, though it was not statistically significant. (For further analyses of the main and interactive effects of positive vs. negative decision frame, i.e., effects of experiment, on both dependent variables, see the Supplemental Material.)

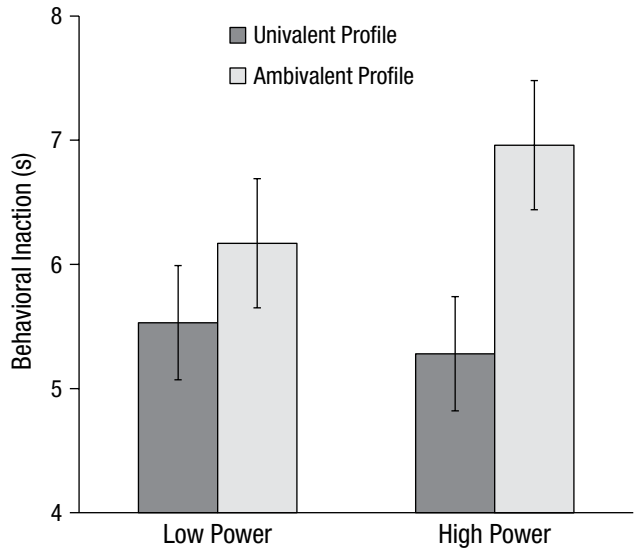

Fig. 2. Behavioral inaction (decision time) as a function of power (low vs. high) and employee profile (univalent vs. ambivalent). The graph shows results for the two experiments combined. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion

The present findings indicate that greater power can lead to significantly more inaction when individuals' reactions are ambivalent. This outcome was predicted on the basis of the self-validation theory of judgment, which holds that power increases people's perception of the validity of their reactions. In other words, if powerful people trust their reactions more than the powerless do, powerful people who are ambivalent should be more hesitant to act compared with powerless people who are ambivalent. Although previous research focused exclusively on the link between power and action in the context of univalent evaluations and found a positive association between power and action (Galinsky et al., 2003), we obtained the opposite effect among people with ambivalent evaluations. Thus, the previously identified power-to-action link transforms into a power-to-inaction link when reactions are ambivalent rather than univalent.

It may be functional for people—especially those who are feeling powerful—to act on their thoughts when a clear course of action is delineated, but also to not act quickly on their thoughts when conflicting, mutually exclusive courses of action are present. Likewise, it sometimes may be dysfunctional for the powerful to delay acting even when they are ambivalent, as in the example of old-sergeant syndrome (Janis & Mann, 1977). Future work could shed light on when the powerful act in ultimately functional versus dysfunctional ways.

It is worth noting that in addition to the self-validation approach, prevailing psychological theories of power might explain the current findings depending on the assumptions made. For instance, the approach-inhibition theory of power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) suggests that people who feel more powerful might act more in accordance with whatever goals are salient at the time. Likewise, the situated-focus theory of power (Guinote, 2007) suggests that greater power predicts greater flexibility, such that the more powerful are more attentive to situational demands and their personal goals. Thus—assuming that ambivalence motivates either conflict

resolution or decision avoidance—these other theories could also predict that greater power would lead to more hesitancy to act when people feel ambivalent. Power and ambivalence are universal aspects of social interaction, and investigating their effects across situations and via multiple psychological processes will broaden understanding of social behavior.

Action Editor

Jamin Halberstadt served as action editor for this article.

Author Contributions

G. R. O. Durso developed the study concept in collaboration with P. Briñol and R. E. Petty. All the authors contributed to the study design. Data were collected and analyzed by G. R. O. Durso. G. R. O. Durso drafted the initial manuscript, and P. Briñol and R. E. Petty provided critical revisions. All the authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Funding

This material is based on work supported by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship under Grant No. DGE-0822215 (G. R. O. Durso), by Spanish Grant No. PSI2014-58476-P (P. Briñol), and by National Science Foundation Grant No. 0847834 (R. E. Petty).

Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information can be found at http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data

Open Practices

All data have been made publicly available via the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at https://osf.io/5ybej/. The complete Open Practices Disclosure for this article can be found at http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data. This article has received the badge for Open Data. More information about the Open Practices badges can be found at https://osf.io/tvyxz/wiki/1.%20View%20the%20Badges/ and http://pss.sagepub.com/content/25/1/3.full.

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