STATEMENT OF RESEARCH INTERESTS

Power is an inherent and integral aspect of our world, defining social roles and allowing organizations to function effectively. Defined as control over others’ outcomes and the ability to influence others, power can result in positive or negative outcomes for individuals and organizations (Lee & Tiedens, 2001; Deprét & Fiske, 1999). My research identifies factors that contribute to the benefits and liabilities associated with the exercise of power in organizations. Specifically, my research addresses these questions: 1) How do perspective taking, identity management, and attachment style affect power use? 2) What are the antecedents of power, and what are the effects of power on employee well-being and satisfaction?

Taming Power: Potential Factors Fueling Power Decisions and Communication Tactics

Is having power beneficial for individuals? The literature paints a somewhat contradictory picture of power. While having power is positively related to many desirable behaviors, such as social and cognitive capabilities, having power can also lead to undesirable outcomes such as increased biases and stereotyping, and inattention to another’s visual and emotional perspective (Galinsky, et al., 2006; Goodwin, et al., 1998; Overbeck & Park 2001; 2006; Smith, et al., 2008). My research examines three psychological mechanisms that influence how people choose to wield power: perspective taking (inferring others’ psychological viewpoints), identity integration (perceived compatibility among multiple social roles), and attachment style (one’s working model for close relationships).

Perspective taking (PT)

My research uses both correlational and experimental designs to examine the relationship between power and PT—defined as the tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological viewpoint of others (Davis, 1980; 1983). While previous research has shown that having power reduces PT (Galinsky, et al., 2006), I examine the reverse causal relationship, or how PT affects the recognition and exercise of power. First, I found that dispositional PT was positively associated with soft or relational forms of power (referent, charismatic power), and negatively associated with harsh forms of power (coercive power and pressure tactics). These findings were true for both student and working adult samples. I also found that PT is associated with more inclusive power recognition; for example, both harsh and soft forms of power are recognized, and actions of lower status individuals in organizations are also included as forms of power.

Second, I conducted two studies using quasi-experimental and experimental designs and found that PT affected communication and decision making among powerholders. In a two-part study, I found that dispositional PT is positively associated with more polite communication tactics in organizations (this finding was true for both student and working adult samples). A second study manipulated PT and found that higher PT was associated with making decisions that were less harsh on individuals who violated organizational rules and norms. Third, I found similar relationships between PT and email communication. In an experiment manipulating PT while participants engage in an organizational task with a confederate, I found that those in the high PT condition used more polite or relational communication tactics than those in the low PT condition (Henderson & Frantz, under revision). Across these studies, the effect of PT was more pronounced for individuals with higher power. Together, my research shows that higher PT is associated with more inclusive power recognition and more soft (or less harsh) power use.

My future research in this line of work takes several directions. In four ongoing studies, I am examining how state PT (rather than dispositional PT) affects communication in response to organizational conflicts or disagreements. My goal in this research is to tease apart different aspects of PT (e.g., cognitive vs. emotional...
PT, or legitimizing vs. delegitimizing PT), and to identify the mechanisms underlying the relationship between PT and power (e.g., self-construal, self-other overlap). I have successfully obtained a grant to fund this line of research.

Identity management strategies

My research also explores how organizational members manage conflicting roles—such as being both a “supervisor” and “friend” to another employee—and how this affects power. In two studies, I found that higher “identity integration”—or perceived compatibility between conflicting roles (Benet-Martinez, et al., 2002)—yields more relational, creative and integrative power tactics. One experiment manipulated identity integration while participants read an organizational vignette describing role conflict (e.g., an authority figure plays the roles of both boss and mentor/friend to an employee). I then measured participants’ power and communication tactics (Henderson & Lee, under review). This study, along with two follow-up studies, found that perceived compatibility of conflicting organizational roles led to more integrative ways of exercising power (or, exercising power in ways that are both typical of a boss and typical of a friend/mentor).

My subsequent studies in this line of research explore the relationship between identity integration and power/communication tactics in three different types of role conflict situations (a superior-friend role conflict in a military setting; a school-personal role conflict; and a school-work role conflict). These studies are currently being conducted in different countries to examine how cultural differences in the interpretation of role conflict affect power use and communication. A research grant is being submitted to fund these studies.

Attachment styles

My research program also examines the relationships among attachment orientations, power, and leadership styles. Attachment style—one’s working model for close relationships—has been shown to predict leader-follower relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Doverspike, et al., 1997). Using correlational and experimental methods, I explore how three primary attachment styles—secure, avoidant, and anxious—are associated with power and leadership tactics. For example, I found that participants primed with avoidant attachment styles (characterized by discomfort with closeness and inattentiveness to relationship-relevant information) demonstrated less relational leadership than participants primed with secure, anxious, or neutral attachment styles (VanSloten & Henderson, 2011). I am currently extending this research by examining how context (e.g. different types of organizations) and individual differences (such as life experience and social knowledge) moderate this relationship between attachment style and leadership/power tactics.

Antecedents and Outcomes of Power in the Workplace

My second line of research uses field-based surveys to examine how power and supervisory tactics relate to individual and organizational outcomes. In one study of a law enforcement organization, I found that perceived procedural injustice is associated with the use of harsh power tactics (coercive power) among supervisors. Furthermore, subordinates of these supervisors were more likely to perceive coworker mistreatment, had lower job satisfaction, and experienced lower psychological wellbeing (Henderson & Cortina, in preparation).

In a second study using longitudinal data collected from a sample of US Air Force personnel, we explored the buffering and reverse-buffering effects of supervisor support on employees (Nahum-Shani, Henderson, Lim, & Vinokur, under revision). We found that supervisor support buffers the adverse effects of
supervisor undermining on employee job-strain and health, but this is true only for employees with high self-esteem and high quality of work-life. For employees with low self-esteem and low quality of work-life, supervisor support exacerbates the adverse effects of supervisor undermining. These results extend current theoretical and empirical work in this area by showing that, depending on the coping capacity of the employees, supervisor support can either buffer or exacerbate the adverse effects of supervisor undermining. In future studies, I plan to further examine these relationships in other types of organizational settings and cultural contexts, and to employ other field-based research techniques such as interviews and observations.

For example, one set of studies I am currently conducting examines the effect of power on a specific workplace outcome—sexual harassment. Although gendered and sexualized forms of harassment are widely experienced by working women (and often detrimental to their personal and professional outcomes), little is known about whether power buffers the detrimental effects of harassment in the workplace (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008; Glomb et al., 1999; Fitzgerald et al., 1988). I address this gap in two ongoing studies manipulating power and harassment type (gendered vs. sexualized), and examining participants’ affective and cognitive outcomes following harassment. These studies found that women experienced a rise in negative affect following exposure to both gendered (sexist) harassment and sexualized (crude) harassment. This effect was consistent across all power manipulations, suggesting that harassment from any status perpetrator can undermine mood. Additionally, participants completed cognitive processing tasks faster, but less accurately following harassment. Thus, harassment interferes with women’s affective states and cognitive performance even when they hold formal power. Though these results come from student samples, I am constructively replicating them with working adults.

Summary

My research examines the psychological factors that exacerbate or mitigate the potentially corruptive effects of power. Using multiple methods (including correlational and experimental survey designs, laboratory experiments, and content analysis) in multiple settings (collecting data among different samples of participants in different types of organizations), I have found triangulating evidence of how psychological mechanisms such as attachment, identity, perspective taking, and self perceptions moderate how power is perceived and used in organizations. Drawing from psychological, organizational, and management theories, I examined the effects of power on multiple outcomes, ranging from communication tactics, to decision making, to job satisfaction and employee health. A deep understanding of the psychological processes underlying power use is critical for developing ways to channel power into socially constructive actions that can enhance organizational members’ wellbeing and improve supervisor-subordinate relations.
References


Nahum-Shani, I., Henderson, M. M., Lim, S., & Vinokur Amiram (revise and resubmit). Supervisor support: Does it buffer or exacerbate the adverse effects of supervisor undermining? *Journal of Applied Psychology*


