Self-regulation and power: How self-regulatory failures can enhance social power

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Abstract

Low self-control is often associated with poor life outcomes. Here, we propose that self-control failures may also provide social benefits by signalling and maintaining power. We identify several pathways by which reduced self-control can assist in ascending social hierarchies. First, the self-enhancing tendencies adopted by people with low self-control may contribute to making positive first impressions and advertising power to new acquaintances. The direct and disinhibited communication styles that stem from self-control failures may also enhance power and lubricate difficult social interactions. Disinhibited aggression can help people maintain and acquire material resources and establish dominance over rivals. Finally, the parallels between the behavior of people with low self-control and people with power (e.g., self-enhancement, disinhibition, approach-orientation, aggression) suggest that people with impaired self-control will be perceived as more powerful than people with intact self-control. Evidence for these propositions and directions for future research are discussed.

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Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott possesses more power than anyone else in Australia — although some argue that this title is held by the captain of the Australian cricket team. Abbott rises early every morning to ride his bicycle before managing the country late into the night. This regiment of fitness and hard work would appear to require immense willpower, and his routine may very well require substantive self-regulatory effort. However, Abbott also exhibits massive self-regulatory failures. On several occasions he has blurted inappropriate comments that derogate women, thereby offending millions of voters and undermining his (self-appointed) role as Minister for Women. This type of story of inappropriateness and catastrophic lapses in self-regulation is common among people placed in high power positions (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005). Indeed, the Stanford prison experiment infamously demonstrated how people placed in the high status role of prison guard can rapidly succumb to engaging in inappropriate and hostile behaviors towards lower status prisoners (Haney et al., 1973). But are these self-regulatory failures among the powerful solely the result of persisting at difficult tasks that subsequently deplete self-regulatory resources, or does the propensity to act in an impulsive and disinhibited manner also assist people in ascending social hierarchies?

Ent, Baumeister, and Vonasch (2012) posited that people in high power positions tend to exert greater regulatory effort on focal tasks, but lack effective regulation for more peripheral tasks. In the present review, however, we suggest that the association between self-regulation and power could also be causally reversed. While power can lead to a range of disinhibited behaviors (Bargh et al., 1995; Brauer & Bourhis, 2006; Guinote, 2010; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), disinhibited behavior may also lead to power. Given that powerful people are

prone to succumb to their hedonic desires (Ent et al., 2012), it is plausible that such behaviors are themselves interpreted as signals of power, and that observers consequently afford social power to those acting in an uncontrolled manner. Here, we review the literature on self-regulation and power from this perspective. We detail evidence that the behaviors adopted by people with compromised self-control assist in maintaining power and promoting social success. Further, we propose that the behavior of people with impaired self-control and people with high power are often indistinguishable, and thus poor self-control should be seen as a reliable signal of power.

Definitions

When self-control is compromised, people are more likely to act on their immediate desires (Hofmann, Friese, & Strack, 2009; McIntyre, Barlow, & Hayward, 2015). For example, taking your boss's sandwich to satisfy hunger pangs may bring immediate rewards, but will likely interfere with your long-term career prospects. The decision to forgo short-term gains to achieve more rewarding long-term goals forms the basis of most definitions of *self-control*. Baumeister and Alquist (2009) define self-control as "a process by which individuals bring themselves in-line with their goals and standards. It encompasses efforts by individuals to alter their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (p. 22). This definition of self-control guides the present discussion.

Acts of self-control are the end result of a series of interconnected processes referred to as *self-regulation*. According to Baumeister and Vohs (2007), self-regulation consists of four distinct components, the first of which is the adoption of standards that set parameters for acceptable and unacceptable behavior (e.g., "I will not steal"). Clearly defined standards are necessary for the second component of self-regulation: monitoring. Monitoring involves the constant comparison of the self to the adopted standard. If the standard is not met, then self-

regulatory processes initiate behavioral change, which brings the self back in line with the standard. The third key component of self-regulation is motivation, as one needs sufficient motivation to achieve the standard and self-regulate effectively. The last component of self-regulation is self-regulatory strength, also known as willpower. Self-regulatory strength is the component that appears to be depleted by self-control attempts; a phenomenon known as *ego depletion* (or depletion).

Power can have several meanings depending on the question being posed. For example, how power is distributed, perceived, and utilised may differ substantially between small social groups and large political groups. Here, we define power as the ability to control the allocation of resources, which may be material (e.g., food or money) or social (e.g., friendship or information). Powerful people control these resources by divvying them out selectively, withholding them, or administering punishments (Keltner et al., 2003). We focus here on both the actions of the powerful, and how powerful people are perceived, to provide a thorough account of how self-regulation influences power displays and power perceptions.

How poor self-control may assist in achieving and maintaining power

There are several pathways by which poor self-control may assist in maintaining or enhancing power. In the following section, we detail how depletion and low dispositional self-control can promote behaviors that enhance power, including self-enhancement, assertive communication, and aggression.

Self-enhancement.

Past research suggests that ego depletion leads people to make more narcissistic (i.e., egotistical, vain, and conceited) self-descriptions as a result of reduced concern about acting in a socially desirable manner (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). Narcissism, while representing

a negative personality quality, can be beneficial insofar as it assists in ascending social hierarchies through accomplishments rather than affiliations (Robins, Tracy, & Shaver, 2001). In addition, narcissism is associated with desirable social qualities such as strong leadership and high self-esteem (Ackerman et al., 2010), and is associated with a greater need for power (Joubert, 1998). Thus, narcissism is a quality possessed by people who possess and seek power, and it is enhanced among people with lower self-control.

Increased power has also been associated with self-enhancing tendencies such as increased optimism and higher self-esteem (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009; Wojciszke & Struzynska-Kujalowicz, 2007). This enhancement occurs because powerful people tend to overestimate the level of control they have over outcomes that are actually beyond their control (Fast et al., 2009). By enhancing the self, powerful people may give the impression of having greater control over social situations compared to powerless people with more realistic self-perceptions. As a consequence, self-enhancement may be a signal of high social power.

One important caveat to this suggestion is that the social benefits associated with self-enhancement may only be evident over short time frames. For example, people who score high on narcissism make better first impressions and are viewed as more competent than those who display low levels of narcissism. After several weeks of regular interactions, however, those same narcissists tend to be rated more negatively by peers and acquaintances (Paulhus, 1998). Similarly, Robins and Beer (2001) found that self-enhancement, a trait characteristic of narcissists, resulted in more positive self-attributions and more positive affect in the short-term. Longitudinal analyses, however, revealed negative long-term outcomes such as low self-esteem and academic disengagement relative to those who did not self-enhance.

These data point to the possibility that increases in narcissistic or self-enhancing tendencies brought about by depletion may be beneficial to depleted individuals, at least in terms of the first impression that they make on new acquaintances. Moreover, because the effects of depletion are not long lasting, the potential negative long-term consequences of narcissism are unlikely to be borne by depleted individuals. Thus, depletion may confer a momentary social advantage insofar as people who are depleted ignore the opinions of others (i.e., reduced social desirability), adopt more grandiose views of themselves, and act in a more confident and competent manner. These displays may give the impression of possessing power.

Assertiveness in difficult social situations. Making a good first impression is important when attempting to attract romantic or coalition partners, and communicating in a relaxed and confident manner is necessary to capitalize on a positive initial impression. As a consequence, people who suppress their inappropriate behavior in difficult circumstances in an effort to make a good impression may actually thwart their own social success and appear unfriendly (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006). In an elegant demonstration of this effect, Apfelbaum and Sommers (2009) had White participants discuss racial diversity with a Black confederate posing as a reporter. Note that both White and Black Americans typically have high levels of anxiety when interacting with each other, and would prefer to have more interracial friends but fear rejection (Barlow, Louis, & Hewstone, 2009; Shelton & Richeson, 2005). This anxiety may explain why White participants display overcompensatory positivity towards racial outgroup members, particularly when they possess stronger racial biases against the outgroup (McIntyre, Constable, & Barlow, 2015; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005). Thus, an interracial interaction represents a difficult social situation that has the potential to induce anxious, contrived, and over-controlled behavior, particularly when it involves sensitive topics.

In their study, Apfelbaum and Sommers had the White participants take part in the discussion after completing either a depleting or a non-depleting task. They found that depleted participants enjoyed the interaction with the Black confederate more, gave more direct responses to questions, and appeared less inhibited compared to non-depleted participants. The findings suggest that depletion can facilitate the positive handling of social interactions between previously unacquainted people by making them less inhibited and more direct with their communication. This effect may be particularly marked in difficult social situations that induce anxiety, such as inter-racial discussions about sensitive topics. In sum, impaired self-control may lubricate difficult social interactions and promote communication styles that are synonymous with power.

Aggression. Aggression may be used as a strategy to establish dominance over rivals and gather and maintain material resources. Indeed, robberies are often accompanied by threats of aggression, and acquiring land and/or power has been the motivation behind the majority of the world's wars. Buss and Duntley (2006) suggest that aggression can deter potential attackers from attempting to forcibly take one's resources due to the high potential costs of hostile acts against an aggressive counterpart. Thus, aggression can be beneficial in terms of acquiring resources from others and preventing one's own resources from being taken.

Several studies have suggested that when people are depleted they behave more aggressively when provoked, for example, by administering stronger noise blasts, serving more hot sauce, and giving harsher performance evaluations compared to non-depleted people (Denson, von Hippel, Kemp, & Teo, 2010; DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; Stucke & Baumeister, 2006). Lower dispositional self-control has also been consistently associated with more aggressive criminal behavior (see Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004).

Responding to provocation in an aggressive manner can help preserve one's social status by signalling to potential rivals that hostile acts will not be tolerated. Because people with compromised self-control are more likely to respond to provocation in an aggressive manner, they should have a greater chance of maintaining and attaining material resources.

Displaying power

The research presented thus far paints a picture of the depleted individual as disinhibited, self-enhancing, forthright, and aggressive. We have argued that these attributes assist in achieving power by facilitating positive first impressions, lubricating difficult social interactions, and maintaining resources and social status (respectively). In the present section, we suggest that these disinhibited tendencies are also direct indicators of power. Indeed, a substantial body of literature suggests that disinhibited, aggressive, direct, and approach-oriented behaviors are all associated with high power (see Brauer & Bourhis, 2006; Keltner et al., 2003). Below, we detail evidence from each of these domains suggesting that the behaviors adopted by people with compromised self-regulation may *also* be reliable signals of power.

High power people tend to engage in more approach behavior, such as entering the personal space of others or initiating physical contact. For example, in a military setting, superiors are more willing to encroach on the personal space of subordinates than vice-versa (Dean, Willis, & Hewitt, 1975). Higher status people are also more likely to take action to modify their environment than low status people (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003), and people who take action quickly are more likely to be treated as leaders (Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). Importantly, research suggests that an approach orientation is perceived as a signal of power. People who engage in approach behaviors, such as non-reciprocated touching, are perceived as higher status, more assertive, and warmer than non-touchers (Major & Heslin,

1982). In addition, people who are more action-oriented are perceived as more powerful compared to people who mull over decisions without making decisive plans (Magee, 2009). Because depletion increases approach motivation and approach behavior (Schmeichel, Harmon-Jones, & Harmon-Jones, 2010), depleted people may be perceived as more powerful than non-depleted people.

Another characteristic of powerful individuals is a lack of behavioral inhibition in social situations. High power people tend to flirt in a more disinhibited manner than those with low power (Gonzaga & Keltner, 2001, cited in Keltner et al., 2003). Powerful people are also less likely to inhibit their speech and consequently are rated more positively (i.e., trustworthy, confident, and knowledgeable) and their messages are more likely to be believed compared to powerless people (Holtgraves & Lasky, 1999). Powerless people, conversely, are more likely to inhibit their feelings and opinions (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006), and speak in a more reserved manner (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). Thus, the direct communication styles adopted by people following depletion (Apfelbaum & Sommers, 2009) may be interpreted by others as indicators of power.

Disinhibited behavior can also take on antagonistic forms. Across a range of contexts it has been found that high status individuals are more likely to tease low status individuals in a hostile manner, and that this teasing is not reciprocated by those with low status (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). Similarly, within relationships, the person who is the least committed to the relationship (and thus the most powerful) is more likely to bully their partner by making threats or becoming violent (Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986). These findings suggest that although it is not without costs, the aggressive behavior demonstrated by depleted people (Denson et al., 2010; DeWall et al., 2007; Stuck & Baumeister, 2006) may be a signal of

power.

As a body of work then, the power literature suggests that high power people are less inhibited, more aggressive, more direct, and more approach-oriented. In addition, the self-control literature suggests that people with depleted or low dispositional self-control display these very characteristics. As a consequence, when people with low self-control engage in disinhibited behaviors, they may also be perceived as possessing power.

Evidence of a link between low self-control and power displays

In the previous sections we detailed why low self-control should be a signal of power. In addition to these conceptual links, direct evidence of a relationship between self-control and power is emerging. Ent et al. (2012) provide a thorough account of the relationship between self-regulation and power. While the authors alluded to the possibility that self-regulation may influence power, their intent was to detail the ways that power influences self-regulation. In their review, Ent and colleagues identify several instances in which power leads to increases in self-regulation for focal tasks and less self-regulation on peripheral tasks. It seems that powerful people tend to exert greater energy on their most important tasks, leaving them drained for less important tasks. This idea is supported by research conducted by Guinote (2007b) who found that power facilitates goal prioritisation and greater attentional focus on key goals. Social gatherings may represent an often peripheral task in which high power people are ineffective at regulating their behavior because regulation is deemed less important in this context. Consequently, it is possible that disinhibition during social interactions may become inextricably linked to perceptions of power in the eyes of observers.

Consistent with this possibility, disinhibition in the form of norm violations has been associated with perceptions of power. In one study, Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Gündemir,

and Stamkou (2011) had participants view a video of a person violating social norms, such as spilling cigarette ash on the floor and not thanking a waiter at a restaurant. Other participants viewed a person placing their ash into an ash tray and thanking the waiter. Van Kleef and colleagues found that norm violator was perceived as more powerful than the norm follower. Therefore, the tendency for depleted people to be disinhibited in social contexts (DeBono, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2011) may be a signal of power.

In further support of this possibility, McIntyre, von Hippel, and Barlow (2015) found that dating profiles manipulated to display high impulsivity were perceived as more powerful than dating profiles displaying low impulsivity. Moreover, impulsivity was positively associated with perceptions of power during live, face-to-face social interactions between same-gender pairs. These results suggested that less controlled behavior may be a signal of power in online dating contexts and during live social interactions.

In sum, evidence is emerging that poor self-control may be a signal of power. The current body of literature suggests that people with low self-control are more likely to act in a disinhibited manner, violate social norms, and act impulsively. Moreover, there is evidence that these correlates of low self-control are associated with power affordance. However, more experimentation is needed to confirm this proposition and the suggested mechanisms underpinning the proposed relationship between self-control and power.

Implications and future directions

Because power is associated with a lack of self-control (Ent et al., 2012), less inhibited tendencies may be perceived as a signal of power. Consequently, people with low self-control may be perceived as more powerful, and in turn, attain greater social standing and the material benefits of power. Greater power may then lead to even less self-control, and so on. This pattern

of power leading to less self-control and less self-control leading to power may create a self-perpetuating cycle of power signalling effects. As noted by Van Kleef and colleagues (2011), a continual cycle of norm violation and power affordance could lead to extreme acts of anti-social behavior. Thus, it may be important for people to resist becoming overly impulsive and disinhibited as the relationship between self-control and power is unlikely to be linear. Indeed, there is likely a point at which uncontrolled behaviors become inappropriate and offensive, thereby risking one's power, as was the case with Prime Minister Abbott's outbursts. Moreover, although poor self-control may initially be seen as a sign of power, over longer time frames it may become a signal of maladjustment and incompetence, as is the case with narcissism (Paulhus, 1998). Van Kleef et al. (2011) propose that people are keen to undermine people who hold power illegitimately, and thus those who repeatedly buck social convention but lack other power attributes may quickly slip down the social ladder. Longitudinal studies assessing the robustness of low self-control as a power signal over time are required to address this question.

It is also of interest to determine whether people can distinguish between self-regulatory failures and an unwillingness to self-regulate in the first place. People high in psychopathy, for example, tend to be more fearless and less empathic, and may therefore *not* attempt to control inappropriate social behavior. This may explain why people high in psychopathy are overrepresented in corporate leadership positions (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010). Given that powerful people conserve self-control capacity for more important tasks (DeWall, Baumeister, Mead, & Vohs, 2011) and that powerful people tend to be less concerned about behaving in a socially inappropriate manner (Keltner et al., 2003), it is possible that power is attributed only to people who make no attempt self-regulate. Thus, an unwillingness to exert self-control would represent an honest power signal. However, it is possible that people are unable to distinguish

between individuals who cannot control their behavior (because they are depleted or have low trait self-control) and those who are unwilling to control their behavior (because they possess power). Therefore, an inability to control one's behavior may be an effective but dishonest signal of power. It will be important for future studies to assess whether people can distinguish between such honest and dishonest self-regulatory cues of power.

A related point to consider is that disinhibited behavior among the powerful may reflect deliberate attempts to violate social norms as a signal of dominance. If so, then greater self-control may actually be required to commit such faux pas. This suggestion is supported by research showing that the powerful have higher working memory capacity (Guinote, 2007a) and are therefore better able to focus cognitive resources on goal pursuit compared to the powerless (DeWall et al., 2011). Thus, possessing power may actually shift self-control standards in such a way that subsequent behavioral displays ensure that one's current social status is maintained. The extent to which inappropriateness among the powerful is reflective of different behavioral standards is currently unknown. Future studies should therefore consider assessing whether self-regulatory standards differ between powerful and powerless individuals, and whether these standards are honed to facilitate status goals.

It will be necessary for future studies to identify the boundary conditions of the power-signalling capacity of low self-control. Past research suggests that norm violators may only be afforded power when their behavior is prosocial (Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Blaker, & Heerdink, 2012). People who display poor self-control in an anti-social manner may therefore not achieve the same power affordance compared to those whose uncontrolled behavior benefits others. Thus, it may be beneficial to conduct future studies that examine whether anti-social behaviors associated with low self-control (e.g., aggression and rudeness) are effective power

signals relative to uncontrolled pro-social behaviors (e.g., risking one's safety to help others). Finally, future studies should determine whether people with low self-control are afforded the flow-on benefits of power, such as material goods, social influence, and allies.

Conclusion

The notion that poor self-control is associated with displays of power is supported by evidence from research on self-regulation, disinhibition, and power. The hallmarks of powerful individuals, including self-enhancement, direct communication, aggression, approach-orientation, and disinhibition are also consequences of impaired self-regulation. By examining the behavioral parallels between people depleted of their self-control and people in high power positions, it seems plausible that poor self-regulation facilitates behavioral displays of power and the potential acquisition of power. Emerging evidence supports the proposition that low self-control is associated with power displays. However, future research is necessary to examine the conditions under which poor self-control may function as a signal of power and might even enhance power, and the point at which low self-control ceases to do so.

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