

## THE INTRAPERSONAL LEVEL

How power shapes the judgment of others' moral character—a social context perspective

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### **Abstract**

In the current chapter, I discuss how having a position of power changes people—the intrapersonal effects of power—and focus on how power changes individuals' judgments of others' moral character. I suggest that power can have both positive and negative effects on moral judgments of others, depending on whether the social context emphasizes cooperation or competition. I propose that power makes individuals view others' moral character more positively when cooperation is the perceived norm, whereas power makes individuals view others' moral character more negatively when competition is the perceived norm. I discuss the growing body of research that provides evidence for these ideas and lay out a roadmap for future research on the topic.

- Power positions and related concerns influence the way people judge the moral character of others.
- Research suggests that power holders are inclined to suspect subordinates to lie or cheat, causing them to judge others negatively.
- Alternatively, some studies reveal that a position of power can also induce positive judgments of other people's moral character.
- This chapter proposes that competitive contexts are most likely to induce power holders to judge other people's moral character negatively, while cooperative contexts will more often induce positive moral judgments.

### **Introduction**

Power and morality both involve desirable resources. Power is defined as having asymmetric control over desirable resources (e.g., money; Emerson, 1962; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), and morality often involves the allocation of desirable resources to

the self or others (e.g., be selfish or fair; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). In the current chapter, I discuss how having a position of power changes people—the intrapersonal effects of power—and focus on how power changes individuals’ judgments of others’ morality. The chapter is structured as follows. I first outline what moral judgment is and isn’t. I then discuss the state of the current literature on power and moral judgment and highlight how considering the social context can help resolve outstanding theoretical inconsistencies. I lastly lay out a roadmap for future research on the topic.

Research to date suggests that power makes individuals view others as lacking moral character. That is, as selfish, uncompassionate, and unethical. Nevertheless, there are also reasons to assume that power can have positive effects on moral judgments (e.g., greater optimism causing people to see others as allies; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Brion & Anderson, 2013). Here, I suggest that power can have both positive and negative effects on moral judgments of others, depending on whether the social context emphasizes cooperation or competition (see Figure 9.1). I propose that power makes individuals view others’ moral character more positively when cooperation is the perceived norm, whereas power makes individuals view others’ moral character more negatively when competition is the perceived norm.

Understanding how social power shapes estimates of others’ moral character is important for several reasons. There is an abundance of research on the effects of power on an individual’s own moral decisions and moral behaviors (e.g., lying, cheating, hypocrisy; Lammers et al., 2008; Dubois et al., 2015), attesting to the relation between people’s control over desirable resources and how they act to accumulate or retain such resources. However, far fewer studies have examined how power changes an individual’s judgment of others’ moral character. The dominant theories on power (e.g., approach-inhibition theory, Keltner et al., 2003) seem ill-suited to explain the current findings on moral judgments of others, making theoretical expansion prudent. Individuals in positions of power also frequently decide on who receives resources (reward) and who does not (punish), and their evaluations of others’ moral character and perceived deservingness are instrumental in guiding these decisions (Mooijman et al., 2015; van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2014; Wiltermuth & Flynn, 2013). Understanding how power shapes the evaluation of others’ moral character, then, helps us understand how resource inequalities are created and perpetuated by power holders. Since people’s perception of what is fair depends in part on whether they think others appropriately reward them (Mooijman et al., 2017; Tyler & Lind, 1992), this analysis also helps us understand how power holders create and perpetuate a sense of fairness amongst those subject to their decisions (e.g., subordinates, citizens).

## **Moral judgment**

Moral judgments involve evaluations of someone's moral character—their perceived inclination to think, feel, and act in a way that is consistent with prevailing norms of right and wrong (Cohen et al., 2014). Right and wrong in this context refers to social norms indicating how people ought to behave and how they ought not to behave in a certain situation (Ellemers & Van den Bos, 2012). Accurately estimating the likelihood that others will act in line with important norms or guidelines is particularly consequential for those controlling the outcomes of others—i.e., power holders. For instance, when managers decide whether to monitor subordinates' workplace behaviors, they are likely to estimate whether subordinates will comply with organizational rules and regulations. Are they seen as tempted to free ride, cut corners, or cheat? Or comply with rules and norms? What managers think the answer to this question is determines whether they will install systems that monitor subordinates' actions in the workplace (e.g., monitor the amount of time they are actively working versus surfing the internet; Schweitzer et al., 2018). Similarly, government officials might base their decisions on how they judge the moral character of citizens: for instance, they are more likely to fine citizens for incorrectly filling out tax forms when they judge this behavior to be the result of cheating rather than incompetence. When this judgment is erroneous, governments criminalize innocent citizens. Power holders' moral judgments, then, can have far-reaching implications for themselves as well as others depending on them.

The current chapter focuses on judgments of other people's morality rather than their competence, a distinction that is analogous to what trust scholars call “integrity-based trust” as compared to “ability-based trust.” Integrity-based trust refers to the judgment that someone can be trusted to comply with ethical rules and regulations (e.g., be fair, do not lie or steal), whereas ability-based trust refers to the judgment that someone can be trusted to have adequate skills and abilities to achieve certain goals (e.g., to do their job; Mayer et al., 1995; see also Leach et al., 2007). In principle, these two types of judgments are independent. It is possible to view someone as inclined to cheat on their taxes and competent at doing so. It is also possible to perceive someone as incompetent but inclined to pay their fair share of taxes (e.g., make a mistake and unintentionally underreport income to the authorities). The intrapersonal process of moral judgment, then, revolves about estimating someone's integrity rather than their competence (for work on how power shapes perceptions of others' competence, see Georgeson & Harris, 1998).

### ***Power often elicits negative moral judgments***

Although power and the impact of power differences between individuals have garnered a tremendous amount of research attention over the last decades, relatively few studies have been devoted to understanding how positions of power shape people's judgments of others' moral character (Fleischmann & Lammers, 2020). The studies that do exist suggest that having high power makes individuals

view others as lacking moral character. For instance, Mooijman et al. (2015) showed that being placed in a position of power increases the extent to which individuals believe others are selfish and inclined to break norms, rules, and regulations. The authors demonstrated this by asking participants to recall a time in their life when they had held a position of power or lacked such power. This autobiographical recall assignment is commonly used and tends to make participants feel temporarily powerful or powerless (Galinsky et al., 2003). After being primed in this way, participants were confronted with various scenarios.

One of these scenarios asked participants whether citizens are inclined to commit tax fraud (e.g., “When it really comes down to it, most taxpayers will be tempted to commit tax fraud”). Participants who felt powerful were more likely to believe that citizens are tempted to commit tax fraud than participants who felt powerless. Further, these moral judgments were consequential, as they made high-power participants more supportive of punishments aimed at deterring citizens from committing tax fraud (e.g., install mandatory minimums, use public punishments). Similar effects were observed when examining the impact of power differences on moral judgments in other contexts. In a follow-up paper, Mooijman et al. (2019) demonstrated that high-power managers were more likely to think that their subordinates are tempted to come late to work, slack off, or steal office-supplies than low-power managers. They found that these moral judgments related to intrapersonal concerns held by the manager, rather than being prompted by specific behaviors of their subordinates. That is, the suspicion that subordinates lacked moral character was explained by power holders’ own desire to maintain their power. Accordingly, viewing others as lacking moral character made managers more inclined to take actions to protect their power position (e.g., prevent others from breaking rules; instill fear; monitor their actions).

Besides the studies summarized above, there is additional empirical evidence suggesting that having or acquiring a position of power makes individuals more likely to view others as lacking moral character. Brion et al. (2019) showed a negative association between momentary changes in power and changes in the perception that others are trustworthy. Likewise, Schilke et al. (2015) provided empirical evidence for the notion that power makes people more likely to believe that others will exploit them in contexts where exchanging resources is risky. More generally, Du Plessis et al. (2023) showed that power holders tend to see others competing with them over who controls valuable resources. This expectation in itself fosters the perception that others are selfish, and even malicious, rather than benevolent (for similar findings, see Feenstra et al., 2020; Inesi et al., 2012; Weber et al., 2004).

A slightly different, but informative, perspective was taken by Wiltermuth and Flynn (2013). They refer to the notion that power holders view the world with more certainty, and accordingly suggest that power increases morality clarity, which

refers to the phenomenon of seeing transgressions as unambiguously morally wrong. They demonstrated this by asking participants to recall a time in their life when they either had or lacked power. After this high vs. low power prime was induced, participants were confronted with the following scenario, highlighting competing loyalties in a moral dilemma:

Your colleague, whom you consider to be a friend, is looking to hire a new manager in her department. She has identified an external candidate she would like to hire, but company rules require her to consider internal candidates first. She has asked you not to disclose to people within the company that she has already picked out an external candidate for the position. However, you know two employees in your area who would like to have this job, and each has asked you directly if your colleague has already picked someone for this position. You decide to tell them that she has not picked anyone yet.

Wiltermuth and Flynn demonstrated that high-power participants considered this behavior more unambiguously wrong than low-power participants and also recommended harsher punishments for this behavior. Similarly, van Prooijen et al. (2014) found that participants who were primed with power recommended harsher punishments and longer sentences for offenders of various crimes (e.g., knowingly selling a broken car that ends up severely injuring the buyer). Power increased punishment severity because participants were more likely to view the offender as possessing negative character traits (e.g., evil, cruel). Taken together, this body of research suggests that considering social situations from a position of high power makes it more likely that people view others as lacking moral character.

### ***Power may also induce positive moral judgments***

Notably, there is a relative absence of research demonstrating that power makes individuals view others' moral character more positively. Nevertheless, there are reasons to assume that power can also increase positive moral judgments. For instance, Brion and Anderson (2013) demonstrated that high-power individuals are more likely than low-power individuals to view others as their allies, to which they attribute positive features. They argue that this is caused by power leading individuals to be more optimistic about opportunities offered by their position, and to focus more on the rewarding aspects of their social environment. This idea is consistent with the approach-inhibition theory of power that postulates that power is associated with the behavioral activation system (BAS; Keltner et al., 2003; Cho & Keltner, 2020). According to this reasoning, power holders are more likely to act and view their social environment as filled with rewards rather than threats. It makes sense, then, to assume that if power holders hold positive world views and

underestimate risks, that they might also view the moral character of those around them more positively. By comparison, those lacking such power are more vulnerable and should be more careful in trusting the good intentions and moral character of others. Thus, having power may induce relatively positive moral judgments.

This raises an interesting question: *when* does power lead individuals to view others' moral character more positively or more negatively? I argue that prior research highlighting the negative implications of power for moral judgment has addressed the impact of power too narrowly and did not consider the larger social context. As a result, this prior work has not systematically examined relevant boundary conditions. I propose that power can have positive and negative effects on moral judgments of others, depending on whether the social context emphasizes cooperation or competition. Power makes individuals view others' moral character more positively when cooperation is the perceived norm, whereas power makes individuals view others' moral character more negatively when competition is the perceived norm.

### **The social context of moral judgment**

Most theories on power highlight the position of the power holder but do not explicitly take into account the larger social context in which power holders make their moral judgments of others. Consequently, it is unclear how power impacts moral judgments, depending on when cooperative or selfish behavior is perceived as the norm. For instance, some situations are perceived as governed by norms of cooperation whereas others are perceived as governed by norms of competition. In many business settings, where relationships are transactional and involve resources exchange, people expect others to compete with them for resources and bend the rules in their favor (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). In fact, merely reminding people of business-related concepts, such as sanctions and money, already makes them view others as competitors (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999). These findings align with prior research on power that shows the negative implications of power for moral judgment: that is, having power, which reminds individuals of their resources, money, and ability to sanction (Tost, 2015), may act as a signal that relationships with others are transactional and based on resource exchange. This may foster the perception that others lack moral character and are selfish and unethical.

However, power holders do not solely act in settings where competition is the perceived norm. They also operate in settings where cooperation is perceived to be prevalent. For instance, although managers and subordinates do not have equal access to resources, they often strive to achieve the same goals. Workplace projects with tight deadlines, collective sales goals, and competition from other firms require managers and subordinates to coordinate and cooperate effectively within their teams, organizations, and institutions (Tjosvold, 1989). Similarly, members of

military teams must anticipate each other's needs, work towards team-level goals, and help each other in case of life and death (Stanton, 2011). Likewise, citizens and their governments must cooperate when faced with significant external threats such as pandemics, wars, and financial crises. Without the cooperation of most citizens, societies are unable to solve collective-action problems (Barclay & Benard, 2020). In these situations, cooperation rather than competition between high-power and low-power individuals is the norm and high- and low-power individuals may perceive to share common goals, identities, and relevant group memberships. How does this shape the relationship between power and moral judgment?

### ***Power, moral judgments, and social norms***

The situated focus theory of power postulates that power directs people's attention to the actions they must take in each situation to achieve important goals (Guinote, 2017). The powerful will prioritize the dominant needs of a given situation, whereas the powerless are more easily distracted by situational difficulties and momentary concerns (e.g., thoughts and feelings irrelevant to situational needs). Indeed, research has shown that power makes individuals better at pursuing situationally relevant goals (e.g., persist at boring tasks; Guinote, 2007), inhibiting goal-irrelevant distractions (e.g., suppress intruding thoughts; Smith et al., 2008), and understanding what goals they should prioritize (e.g., the core parts of the task; Magee & Smith, 2013). Research has also shown that power increases self-interested behavior for people who have the goal to pursue their own self-interest, whereas power increases prosocial behavior for people who have the goal to be attentive and take into account others' views and needs (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; see also Galinsky et al., 2003). This means that instead of focusing on the main effects of high vs low power on moral judgments, we should understand the interactive effects of power and the dominant needs of a given social situation on moral judgment.

Prior research on power and moral judgment, for instance, has typically placed participants in settings where their interests *conflicted* with the interests of others. Mooijman et al. (2015, 2019), Du Plessis et al. (2022), and Schilke et al. (2015) used some version of a social dilemma game where participants' interests misaligned with the interests of others (e.g., participants could maximize their return by taking money out of a common good). Participants were then asked to what extent others were trustworthy and would cooperate, or whether others were untrustworthy and would be selfish at participants' expense. This means that participants were made to understand the social context as one where others might be inclined to be selfish and display exploitative behaviors. In a similar vein, Wiltermuth and Flynn (2013), and van Prooijen et al. (2014), elicited responses to scenarios where others broke the rules. This means that the social context presented to participants was one where others had already broken rules, displayed a questionable moral character, and had to be punished. Most studies to date on the impact of power on moral judgments, in

other words, examined contexts that can be characterized in retrospect as settings where cooperation is not a given, selfish behavior can be expected, and others' moral character is questionable. It is therefore no surprise that these studies showed that power made individuals view others' moral character more negatively.

Indeed, these contexts induced goals that high-power were more likely to focus on than low-power individuals. When social contexts emphasize that people's interests are misaligned, and desirable resources might be taken from you, power focuses individuals' attention on the goal to protect their resources from others and prevent exploitation. In fact, research has shown that people can view others' moral character negatively as a resource-protection-strategy (Feenstra et al., 2020). When people are motivated to protect their resources, they assume that others are selfish, uncompassionate, and unethical because doing so allows them to take the appropriate actions to avoid being exploited (e.g., not share resources with others; use sanctioning and monitoring systems; Mooijman et al., 2019). In addition, when the social context emphasizes that others have already broken rules, power focuses people on the goal to prevent them from breaking more rules (Mooijman et al., 2015). It also focuses attention on offenders' negative characteristics, as viewing offenders positively might mean erroneously assuming that they will not break any future rules (van Prooijen et al., 2014). Thus, the reason why prior research has found that power induces negative moral judgments may be due to the usage of social contexts that emphasized competition and rule-breaking behavior over cooperation.

Consistent with the notion that social contexts matter for understanding the relationship between power and the moral judgment of others, Brion et al (2013) found that people primed with high power, compared to low power, *overestimated* the extent to which their team members were willing to cooperate with them. This study was conducted with college students who worked on team projects together and were asked whether their fellow students were allies who were inclined to help them with task-related problems. This finding aligns with the notion that power makes individuals view others' moral character more positively when cooperation is perceived as the norm. Indeed, cooperation tends to be the perceived norm in student teams, as students typically share both an identity as students at their respective university and the goal to bring their team's project to a successful end. Brion and Anderson's (2013), then, studied social settings with perceived cooperative norms. This made powerful individuals view others' moral character more positively. Taken together, the current body of work on power and moral judgment suggests that power makes individuals view others' moral character more positively when cooperation is the perceived norm, whereas power makes individuals view others' moral character more negatively when competition and rule breaking is the perceived norm.



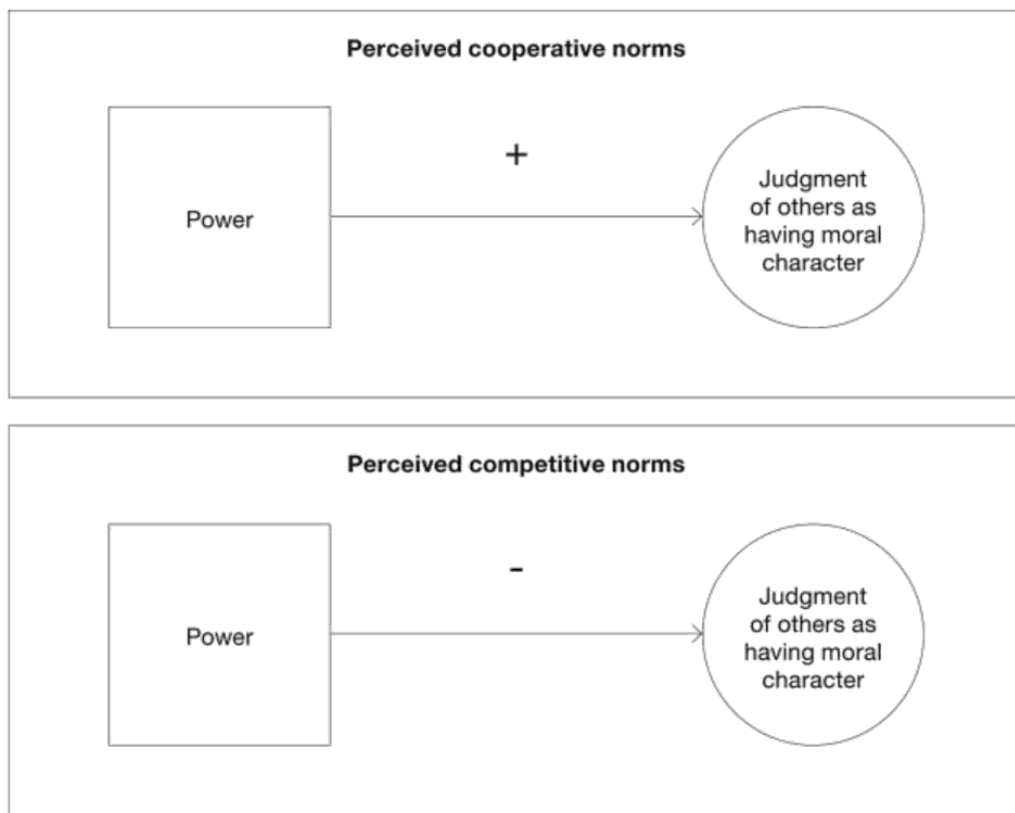


Figure 9.1 Perceived cooperative and perceived competitive norms.

### Future research directions

If social context moderates the relationship between power and moral judgment, then researchers of moral judgment need to take this into account in their theorizing and their research designs. Exclusively focusing on settings where rule-breaking behavior is common, interests are misaligned, or ethically dubious behaviors are salient, increase the odds that power makes individuals view others' moral character more negatively. It also increases the odds that a literature draws erroneous conclusions on how power shapes moral judgment. Of course, some strands of research might specifically want to address those settings and exclusively focus on research paradigms that highlight these aspects of social interactions (e.g., trust games; public goods games; crime). Nevertheless, when interpreting results from such studies it is important to take into account that their conclusions on the role of power are bounded by this specific choice of social context. Indeed, because the current analysis suggests that the impact of power on the moral judgment of others is bounded by social context, it provides implications for integrating research on power and moral judgment with other theoretical perspectives.

For instance, a subset of research on power has focused on integrity-based trust and drawn the conclusion that power decreases trust in others (e.g., Mooijman & Graham, 2018). Although there is empirical evidence that supports this conclusion,

the notion that power amplifies dominant situational goals suggests that perceived interpersonal similarity and joint group membership may change the relationship between power and trust. Research on social identity has demonstrated that people trust others more when these others are similar (vs. dissimilar) to them and share (vs. do not share) a group membership with them (Tanis & Postmes, 2005). Within groups, cooperation tends to be the norm, whereas between groups, competition tends to be more prevalent (Wildschut et al., 2003). It is possible, then, that high-power individuals trust similar others more, but dissimilar others less, than low-power individuals. It is also possible that how people construe power (as a personal opportunity or as responsibility for others; see Scholl et al., 2022 for a detailed discussion on this) changes the relationship between power and moral judgment. When people see their power as an opportunity to advance their own interests at the expense of others, this highlights conflicting interests. In contrast, when people see their power as a responsibility for others' needs and interests, this highlights mutual, cooperative interests. A responsibility construal of power may make high-power individuals view others' moral character more positively than low-power individuals; whereas an opportunity construal of power may make high-power individuals view others' moral character more negatively than low-power individuals. The current chapter, then, provides a way of thinking about the relationship between power, moral judgment, and social context that connects to other theoretical perspectives and provides concrete and useful future research directions.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I considered how people's high vs low power positions impact upon their moral judgments of others. I reviewed the state of the current literature on power and moral judgment, highlighted how considering the social context in which power holders make moral judgments can help resolve outstanding theoretical inconsistencies, and made suggestions for future research on the topic. As such, I focused on how having a position of power changes the way individuals evaluate the moral character of others—the intrapersonal effects of power. Given the omnipresence of power and the far-reaching consequences of judging others as having or lacking moral character, future research should integrate research on power and moral judgment with social identity theory and the construal of power as an opportunity or responsibility. Doing so could provide a more nuanced, dynamic, and complete picture of the relationship between power, social context, and the judgment of others' moral character.

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