

**Power's Mission:
Impact and The Quest for Goal Achievement**

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Highlights

- Power activates social influence goals and goals linked to power roles
- Power elicits goal orientation, energizing people towards actions that help initiate and advance any salient aims and desires
- Power facilitates goal related cognition
- Powerholders' goal orientation can be beneficial for the performance of some tasks
- However, power can trigger the neglect of secondary goals, social inattention and social objectification.

Abstract

This article discusses evidence linking power to purpose: that of having an impact in the social world and carrying out individual or collective aims and desires. First, it highlights the role of goals during the emergence and the exercise of power. Accordingly, it suggests that power's mission is to initiate and strive for social or personal objectives. This includes social influence goals, organizational or personal agendas. Secondly, the article describes how power affects goal related strategies and cognitive inclinations. Evidence suggests that power triggers prioritization and facilitates the pursuit of any salient goals, filtered by personal values and inclinations of the powerholder. Thirdly, the article examines powerholders' effectiveness of goal pursuit, including their performance on tangible social tasks. Finally, the article ends with a discussion on non-intended consequences of the power-goal links in particular in the social domain.

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1. Introduction

Power has been defined in social sciences as the ability to produce intended effects, have an impact on the social environment [1], and carry out one's wishes in spite of resistance [2]. People in positions of power and authority carry out educational, organizational or justice related goals, often through the lenses of their vision and priorities. They do so with help of various means, including soft or harsh means, and the formation of subtle coalitions and strategies involving what is known as *organizational politics* [3]. If the exercise of power is the pursuit of collective and personal goals, then understanding how power affects goal related behavior is key for the understanding of power related phenomena.

This article discuss evidence that links power with enhanced goal orientation. It will start by conceptualizing power in the context of social influence goals and outcome goals carried out during the exercise of power. Then it describes how enacting power roles affects motivation and cognition, by energizing individuals, enhancing wanting, and the prioritization of salient goals. It also discusses the types of goals that powerholders pursue. Here evidence suggests that power facilitates the initiation and pursuit of any salient goals, which renders powerholders' behavior situated in line with focal goals. Then the article considers the ways power affects the effectiveness of goal pursuit in social and non-social contexts. The article will end with a recognition of the shortcomings of powerholders' goal orientation. This includes social objectification, goal dependent moral inclinations and neglect of secondary goals.

2. The Exercise of Power Triggers a Chronic Goal State

Power is a relational concept that involves the exercise of control and influence [4]. Frequently, power asymmetries are legitimized with the goal of advancing group agendas that necessitate social coordination, such as the goals of companies, tribunals or schools. Here

powerholders' duty is the attainment of group targets, such as revenues, transfer of knowledge, justice, social order, as well as the operation of organizations. Powerholders do so while maintaining social influence on an adaptable but persistent basis as means or sub-goals to the overarching aim of their power roles. Among humans and other primates, absolute power is rare and the exercise of power is generally a negotiated, effortful process, even when hierarchies are stable [5]. Given the uncertainty of the social environment and the dynamic nature of organizational operations, power roles call for prompt intervention. In other words, power roles require swift decision making and goal directed action. Power relations can also exist in the absence of shared goals, when individuals have dominant personalities or have means of influence (e.g., resources) that others depend upon. In such cases powerholders' are free to pursue their personal aspirations, exercise influence and resist social influence [6]. In summary, power comes with a sense of purpose and the overarching chronic goal of attaining objectives often involving some form of social influence. Goal orientation in turn elicits a readiness to make decisions regarding options and courses of action, as well as setting and pursuing goals [7].

Goals refer to "internal representations of desired states, where states are broadly construed as outcomes, events, or processes" [8] (p. 338). Goals are carried out through different stages of *goal setting, initiating, and striving and persisting in the face of obstacles* [9]. They require awareness but can operate in an automatic manner [10]. During goal pursuit, individuals move through discrepancy reduction loops [11][12], with the help of

cognitive and neuropsychological mechanisms that energize behaviour and sustain goal directed action [13]. Goal pursuit involves effort and persistence, especially when goals are difficult to attain [7]. The Behavioral Approach System (BAS) associated with reward seeking is also implicated in goal pursuit [4] [14] [15][16]). That is, BAS is a neuropsychological system that responds to rewards, the pursuit of desired aims, and opportunities for action [17].

3. Power, Effort and Goal Related Cognition

A great deal of past research has been carried out to test the hypothesis that powerful individuals prefer effortless information processing strategies [18], rely on stereotypes [19] [20], heuristics [4], such as anchoring [21], and the concepts that first come to mind [22]. They are disinhibited and display poor self-regulation [4]. This notion seemingly contradicts the viewpoint of this article that power triggers purposeful behavior.

The situated focus theory of power [23] posits that powerholders more readily respond and adapt their processing strategies in a situated manner in line with the states and desires that arise in the situation. They deploy effort and self-regulation to satisfy their salient goals, while disregarding other potential or secondary goals (see also [24] [25]). Min and Kim [25] manipulated power and type of goal for which drinking water was relevant or irrelevant (exercise vs. neutral goal). Participants then saw an advert of an ecofriendly bottle of water. Compared to control and powerless participants, powerful participants under the neutral goal had worse attention, memory and were less persuaded by information portrayed in the advert. The opposite occurred when the exercise goal was active and drinking water was relevant. This effect was not mediated by enhanced levels of confidence.

Similarly, powerholders deploy effortful thought related to upcoming events [26] or seek creative solutions [27] when so doing is helpful for the task at hand. Specifically, Scholl and Sassenberg [26] found that compared to low power participants, those assigned to a high power condition engaged less in pre-factual thought (e.g., in mental simulation prior to an action, for instance, “what if I spend time studying instead of going out?”). However, when the structure of the task indicated that forethought could be beneficial for performance, powerholders engaged in forethought. In a similar vein, Gervais et al. [27] found that powerholders were more creative in a name generation task than powerless participants were when doing so enhanced their performance. Only when creativity was not beneficial for performance powerholders resorted to habitual responses.

Other studies have shown that power triggers selective allocation of attentional resources [28] (e.g., time spent reading information), and impression formation [29] in line with active goals. When pursuing multiple goals, people in power prefer to prioritize a focal goal, whereas those who lack power tend to multitask [30]. This is particularly the case when task demands are high [31]. The tendency to prioritize is not driven by enhanced executive functions related to multitasking (dual tasking, task switching, [30]), nor other executive functions [32]; it seems to stem from strategic prioritization.

4. The Direction of Behavior: The Goals of Powerholders

Power differences emerge in diverse social contexts with context specific aims, and so people in positions of power can pursue differing goals one from another. They tend to focus on legitimate goals associated with power roles, such as their political mandates or aims of

institutions, including the management of operations and people [33]. In addition, powerholders often focus on personal goals, such as the implementation of their vision and desire to prevail [34]. These goals are pursued in idiosyncratic ways depending in part on organizational culture (e.g., people or product-oriented, [29]; sexist culture, [35]). The role of powerholders can be embraced with social responsibility [36], and varied levels of identification with the groups they influence [37]. Crucially, experimental and quasi-experimental research found that being in a high power position motivates the pursuit of any desired end states [23], regardless of whether these are chronically or situationally accessible [38].

Goal orientation is associated with striving for one's will, often at the expense of other people's will. Given people's general self-serving biases, and powerholders' relative freedom from constraint, having power can lead to self-serving behavior. This tendency is moderated by personal inclinations [39] and culture [40] [41]. Indeed, powerholders are less likely to adopt the goals of others. For instance, powerholders were less likely to pursue an achievement goal, when that goal was associated with that of their mothers [42]. Conversely, those in relatively low power are more likely to prioritize and adopt the goal of other people. In partnerships, they adopt the goals of their romantic partners [43]. More broadly, lack of power impairs goal attainment and self-regulation, which leads to a disadvantage in negotiations [44].

5. Effectiveness and Goal Performance

One question that arises is whether power affects the effectiveness of goal attainment. Power leads to a boost in performance in many types of tangible tasks. Ample evidence stems from social tasks that require coordination from others. Powerholder's goals are less likely to be challenged, because power usually elicits compliance from subordinates, and reduces subordinates' resistance. In politics, *political clout* predicts policy objectives met [45].

Powerholders achieve better social evaluations [46][15], as their confidence is interpreted as a sign of competence [47]. In negotiations, powerholders make the first move and enjoy a bargaining advantage [48]. This is especially so in high-pressure negotiations [49], such as job interviews [50].

Most leadership literature focuses on the effectiveness or ability to influence others and attain organizational outcomes [51]. Leaders influence subordinates' perceptions of the path to goal attainment, the attractiveness of the goal [52], and goal endorsement [53]. To do so, leaders use formal means (rewards or coercion) or more personal, soft means (expertise, loyalty or group identification; [54]). An examination of the means used by powerholders shows that soft means are more effective on various markers of powerholders' goals, such as in generating compliance and increasing subordinates' performance (e.g., job performance; [55]; creativity;[56]). This strategy also garnered greater satisfaction and commitment from subordinates [57].

There is more evidence listing how power affects performance in social tasks compared to non-social tasks, possibly because power is a construct with social functions. Some evidence focusing on non-social tasks shows, for instance, how power helps performance in creative tasks. Powerholders' ability to hold abstract thought [58] could explain this finding. However, as indicated above, the boost in creativity is only observed when creativity is required for goal attainment [27], once again reiterating that the power holder's performance is closely linked to goal focus. People in power roles make more attempts to solve problems they encounter [23]. They are more motivated to engage in, and enjoy the activity that leads them to attain their goals [59].

Power can hinder performance, when linked to overconfidence [60], hubris [61], self-deception [62] and therefore the neglect of key information. Studies on testosterone as a

proxy for power have shown that overconfidence leads to excessive risk taking, lower financial performance in investments [63], and higher volatility in markets [64], as testosterone hinders cognitive reflection [65]. This link, however, is not always linearly negative, as a study on a London trading floor showed that testosterone up to a level, can lead to higher profits [66].

6. Shortcomings of Power and Goal Focus

So far we have discussed how power increases focus on the primary goal which assists in performance of various tasks [23] [29]. However, there are unintended consequences of power that are explained by the enhanced focus on one's primary aims and desires.

First is social objectification, as subordinates can be seen as means for the goal of the powerholder. Powerholders are more likely to value others instrumentally, that is, by their utility in goal achievement [67] [68]. This tendency increases in line with the saliency of the goal. For example, perceptions of sexual interest from others were only enhanced for powerful people when a mating goal was activated [69].

A closely related construct is social inattention. When it is unhelpful to the powerholder's goal attainment, they do not pay attention to others [29]. The link between social position and interpersonal accuracy cannot be explained without examining the goals of powerholders [70]. In the domain of emotion, studies found evidence of power dropping empathy [71]. The lack of affiliation motivation explained why powerholders are less likely to feel compassion towards others' suffering [72], showing again that the powerholder's motivation is key in understanding their social inattention. The desire to be free from others can increase stereotyping, while the desire to have power over others has the opposite effect [73].

Myopic goal focus leads to the neglect of non-goal areas. The powerful can lack impulse control in other, trivial or unrelated tasks [74]. Such trivial personal mishaps can turn into

public scandals that could be career-ending moves, therefore undermining the focal goal in the long run. However, sometimes these mishaps enhance social power, especially when it is viewed as disinhibited aggression [75]. In fact, violating norms boost perceptions of power [76] and competence, especially when the nonconforming behavior is seen as intentional [77], or benefiting others [78]. Because powerful people identify more strongly with their organization [79], feel responsible to and internalize the organization's goals [37], they are less likely to notice unethical processes within their organization as being wrong [80]. Goal setting literature has ample evidence positing that the framing and setting of goals increases unethical behavior [81]. Specifically, goal difficulty and goal contingent reward systems can lead to destructive leader behavior in organizations [82].

Insecurity of power positions increases the likelihood of a mismatch between the goal of the powerholder and their organization [83]. When such a conflict arises, individuals in leadership positions may sacrifice group goals for the sake of self-interest [84] [85]. Similarly, when a powerholder's identity goal (e.g. being a lawyer or a banker) is challenged, moral concerns can be overridden [86] to correct this.

7. Conclusions

Power comes with the activation of social influence goals, and goals related to the exercise of power, such as power maintenance and the achievement of organizational outcomes. As such, power triggers a state of chronic goal motivation and cognition, which tends to permeate all spheres of social life. Powerholders' goal focus and commitment activates them, increasing their readiness to initiate and strive for their salient aims and desires, in a flexible and situated manner. Power can enhance the attainment of goal outcomes in various tangible tasks, in particular in the social domain. However, it comes with the neglect of secondary goals, including social relational goals. Personal inclinations and the situation can evoke a dark side of power, including the pursuit of self-interest, social

inattention and social objectification. In spite of this evidence, little is known about how power and the situation interact, including the examination of the links between power, motivation and cognition in political, educational, financial or organizational contexts. Quasi-experimental research is necessary to ensure ecological validity across various power domains.

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- deliberation is desirable for performance.
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