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4 The leaders' rosy halo: why do we give power holders the benefit of the doubt?

Pamela K. Smith and Jennifer R. Overbeck

Political and military leaders cheating on their spouses. Heads of banks committing widespread fraud. Religious leaders hiding abuse in their ranks rather than reporting it to the police. From the famous statement by Lord Acton to modern examples of power holders lying, cheating, and stealing, it has become a truism that power corrupts those who possess it. Given this apparently repeated association of power and corruption, it should naturally follow for people to expect the worst from power holders. Indeed, laypeople seem to regard power itself as a topic inappropriate for polite conversation, and power-seeking behaviors as distasteful, potentially harmful, and presumably self-centered (e.g., Ng, 1980).

However, other evidence suggests that individuals' feelings about power and those who possess it are more nuanced. Though some power holders may be viewed with suspicion, many of them are admired, and individuals generally desire some degree of control in their own lives (e.g., Langer, 1975). We propose that, rather than being inherently suspicious of those in power, individuals are generally credulous towards power holders and see them in positive terms.

In the present chapter, we begin by examining power holders themselves, detailing the multiple possible origins of the idea that power corrupts and discussing research that suggests a more nuanced view. Then we shift focus to perceivers, first acknowledging ways in which perceptual patterns may foster associations between power and corruption and then presenting data showing that people might instead have a positive view of those in power as a default. We review several reasons why such a positive view is likely to be far more prevalent than is recognized. Finally, we discuss the implications of this "leaders' rosy halo" for both theorizing about power and real-life hierarchies.

Corruption as a function of the power holder

Given the ubiquity of the notion that power corrupts, we must first consider potential roots of this idea. One possibility is that power does

indeed corrupt those who possess it. In line with social-psychological and related research on power, we define power as asymmetric control over valued resources and outcomes (Emerson, 1962; Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson, 2003; Magee and Galinsky, 2008; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). From this definition, it naturally follows that those who have power are more independent than those who lack it (cf. Lee and Tiedens, 2001). Perhaps this independence frees those with power to behave without concern for others (e.g., Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson, 2003). A random sampling of news headlines of the last year reveals multiple examples across numerous nations of bad behavior on the part of power holders. Indeed, much of the social-psychological research on power in the last few decades has also focused on the negative consequences of possessing power (see, e.g., Lee-Chai and Bargh, 2001). For example, Fiske (1993) proposed that powerful people stereotype their subordinates, both intentionally and unintentionally, whereas subordinates pay attention to those above them and seek individuating information about them (Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske *et al.*, 2000). Power has also been associated with other examples of antisocial behavior such as reduced perspective taking (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi *et al.*, 2006) and increased self-anchoring (Overbeck and Droutman, 2013), greater hypocrisy (Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky, 2010), more negative evaluations of others (Georgesen and Harris, 1998), and less distress and compassion in response to another's suffering (Van Kleef, Oveis, and van der Löwe, 2008). In other words, the stereotype of the corrupt power holder might have its basis in reality.

However, the evidence for the corrupting nature of power is more mixed than is commonly thought. One problem is the often correlational nature of the data. In real life, individuals are rarely "randomly assigned" to powerful positions; they are selected by others to be elected or promoted to them. Unfortunately, various forces conspire to increase the likelihood that the wrong people ascend to power. It can be difficult to accurately assess the traits one would desire in a leader, and the cues often used as evidence for these traits may be misleading. In fact, sometimes these cues lead the worst people, rather than the best, to be promoted to powerful positions. For example, in one set of studies participants attained high-status positions in their social groups most often when they were active participants in the group discussion and thus appeared competent, even when private assessments revealed they were not actually competent (Anderson and Kilduff, 2009). Individuals who gain power but do not feel competent behave more aggressively towards others (Fast and Chen, 2009). Similarly, narcissists attain positions of leadership more often than nonnarcissists, in part because they

seem confident and authoritative (Nevicka, Ten Velden, De Hoogh *et al.*, 2011). Narcissistic leaders do not seek new information and otherwise tend to engage in risky and attention-grabbing behavior that leads to worse group performance (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007; Nevicka *et al.*, 2011). In this case, it is not that power corrupts, but rather that corrupt individuals may be more likely to obtain power and then are more able to behave badly due to the power they have been given. However, either case provides a realistic basis for the development of a belief that "power corrupts."

A more complex view of the power holder

Yet experimental power research also yields more nuanced results than the blunt conclusion "power corrupts." Power can lead to stereotyping when a stereotype is available and relevant (Chen, Ybarra, and Kiefer, 2004; Vescio, Snyder, and Butz, 2003), but power also leads to more individuation, with high-power individuals forming a more coherent, accurate representation of another's personality than low-power individuals (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee *et al.*, 2008, Experiment 2; Overbeck and Park, 2001, 2006). Power leads to less perspective-taking in some circumstances (Galinsky *et al.*, 2006), but increased perspective-taking in others (Côté, Kraus, Cheng *et al.*, 2011; Schmid Mast, Jonas, and Hall, 2009). Power holders are posited to be cognitive misers, reserving their efforts for tasks that they deem worthy (e.g., DeWall, Baumeister, Mead *et al.*, 2011), yet those who have power frequently show equivalent or better performance on cognitive tasks than those who lack it (e.g., Overbeck and Park, 2001, 2006; Smith, Dijksterhuis, and Wigboldus, 2008a; Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky *et al.*, 2008b).

Such seemingly contradictory effects may result from the same underlying cognitive process. Because power creates a greater sense of social distance in those who possess it, power holders should, and do, engage in more abstract thinking than those who lack power (Huang, Galinsky, Gruenfeld *et al.*, 2011; Magee, Milliken, and Lurie, 2010; Smith and Trope, 2006; Stel, van Dijk, Smith *et al.*, 2012). The strength of this link is reflected in its bidirectionality: Thinking abstractly makes a person feel more powerful (Smith, Wigboldus, and Dijksterhuis, 2008c), and appearing to be an abstract thinker, such as by using more abstract language, leads others to perceive a person as being more powerful (Wakslak, Smith, and Han, 2013). Much of both the good and the bad behavior previously associated with power is a consequence of this increase in abstract thinking, as described in the social distance theory of power (see Magee and Smith, 2013, for a review). For example, abstract thinking leads to

more stereotyping when a stereotype is available (e.g., Chen *et al.*, 2004) and more individuation (i.e., representing individuals in terms of traits) when a stereotype is not available (e.g., Overbeck and Park, 2001). After all, both individuation and stereotyping involve generalization: individuation involves generalizing from specific behaviors performed by a target, and stereotyping involves generalizing from specific group memberships, but in both cases the resulting inference is assumed to represent a relatively stable characteristic of the target person. A critical consequence of the link between power and abstract thinking is that power reveals the person. That is, abstract thinking increases the correspondence between traits and behavior (Torelli and Kaikati, 2009), so that power holders behave more in line with their values and personalities than those below them. Thus, for example, power increases communal, selfless behavior in those who by nature are communal or have a strong moral identity, but decreases the same behavior in those who by nature are exchange-oriented or have a weak moral identity (Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh, 2001; DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis *et al.*, 2012). This also means power holders behave more in line with the goals they have (e.g., Guinote, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2008b), and those goals can be prosocial or otherwise beneficial for their group, or antisocial or otherwise selfish (e.g., Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld *et al.*, 2008; Overbeck and Park, 2006; Karremans and Smith, 2010).

Of importance, the basic link between power and abstract thinking is functional, even if not all the consequences are desirable. Power holders, due to their elevated position, have the big-picture perspective and breadth of knowledge best suited to abstract thinking (in contrast to those below them, who generally possess a narrower range of information). At the same time, this high-level view inherently reduces emphasis on, or perhaps even perception of, the details. For example, a CEO, being responsible for an entire organization, may be attuned to its survival (financial performance), fundamental relationships (with external stakeholders, the board, regulators), and future goals. However, she may not be cognizant of how each of her decisions affects the activities, well-being, and security of each individual employee. As a result, the CEO may appear corrupt when those decisions create adverse impacts on members of the firm, even if risking the firm's survival would have potentially worse long-term effects on more people.[1]

[1] Beyond the effects of a CEO's own processing style, CEOs must more often deal with major moral dilemmas than subordinates, by sheer nature of being the ones tasked with making important, impactful decisions.

Corruption as a function of the perceiver

Even if power holders are not actually more likely to exhibit corrupt behavior than those below them, various information-processing tendencies on the part of perceivers may nonetheless lead power holders to be seen as more corrupt. First, power holders, and thus their behaviors, receive increased attention from others due to the control they have over resources and outcomes. As Fiske (1993) detailed in her "power as control" model, subordinates need to, and generally want to, form detailed impressions of power holders in an attempt to better understand these people and predict their behavior. This heightened attention also occurs because power holders are viewed as the representative of their group or organization[2] (because the most prototypical group members frequently emerge as leaders, this can be logical; e.g., Hogg, 2001; see also Overbeck and Droutman, 2013). That is, they stand for the group itself, and thus, within a group context, they attract the most attention. Indeed, individuals' faces receive more attention and are better remembered when they are simply labeled as holding a high-status (vs. a low-status) job (Ratcliff, Hugenberg, Shriver *et al.*, 2011). Such heightened attention to power holders means more eyes are focused on their behaviors, both positive and negative, so their slip-ups are more likely to be noticed, not to mention broadcast to a wide audience (e.g., when a mail carrier cheats on his/her spouse, it does not make the front page). Furthermore, since negative information, particularly when it pertains to morality (e.g., Skowronski and Carlston, 1987), is processed more thoroughly, is remembered better, and has a greater impact on impressions of individuals than positive information (i.e., *positive–negative asymmetry* or *negativity bias*; see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer *et al.*, 2001, for a review), once any corrupt behavior on the part of a power holder is noticed, it will have undue influence on how others view the power holder. That is, the salience of both power and negative actions is heightened, so that when the two co-occur, their effect on impressions is pronounced.

Second, because power holders and negative behaviors are distinctive, the two are more likely to be *erroneously* associated in people's minds. Since people show better recall for distinctive stimuli, distinctive individuals are particularly likely to be remembered when they do distinctive things. As a result, perceivers will overestimate the likelihood of these individuals performing that particular behavior, a phenomenon known as

[2] This role of being the group representative may also contribute to power holders being seen as corrupt. As representatives, power holders are often held responsible, both informally and formally, for any inappropriate or immoral behavior on the part of individual group members.

illusory correlation (Chapman and Chapman, 1967). Negative stereotypic beliefs may be supported in part by illusory correlations. Hamilton and Gifford (1976) presented participants with information about majority and minority group members performing positive and negative behaviors. They found that their participants overattributed negative behaviors to the minority group members, even though the ratio of the positive to negative behaviors in their studies was identical for the majority and the minority group. Power holders are not only more distinctive than those below them in the sense that they grab more attention, but they are also numerically distinct. In any given social group, high-power roles are ordinarily held by fewer individuals than are low-power roles. Therefore, observers will be likely to perceive a correlation between having power and behaving badly, even when no such correlation exists.

Finally, to the extent that perceivers have the expectation that "power corrupts," they will be prone to construing situations in a manner that confirms their expectations (exhibiting confirmation bias; Snyder, 1984). Many decisions made by power holders involve trade-offs among competing interests and stakeholders. An outcome that is satisfying and clearly ethical to one group may seem hurtful and immoral to another. Due to their negative expectancies regarding power holders, perceivers may tend to focus on the more negative interpretation of power holders' decisions, highlighting harms and failures while overlooking positive outcomes. Even when a decision is truly ambiguous, and neither harms nor benefits are clear, the lay belief that power corrupts may lead perceivers to assume that there must be some nefarious consequence soon to emerge.

The rosy halo: power casts a positive light on those who hold it

Given these reasons for having an association between power and corruption, it would not be surprising for individuals to assume that power holders are immoral and should not be trusted. Indeed, some evidence suggests that people do take a negative view of those who have power over them. For example, previous studies have found a negative association between supervisors' power and both subordinates' satisfaction (Bachman, 1968; Bachman, Smith, and Slesinger, 1966; Bruins, Ellemers, and De Gilder, 1999) and judgments of the supervisors' likeability (Bruins *et al.*, 1999). However, we propose that this work – which has not specifically examined judgments relevant to *corruption*, per se – does not provide the final word. Instead, we propose that perceivers actually tend to regard the powerful, particularly those who have power over them, as *more* moral and *less* corrupt than those who are not especially powerful.

The notion that individuals view power holders in a positive light, particularly in regard to morality and ethics, may contradict prevailing beliefs, but past research provides several points of support. First, individuals generally prefer to believe that the world is just and fair and that people get what they deserve (e.g., the just-world hypothesis; Lerner, 1980). Similarly, system-justification theory holds that individuals are motivated, both consciously and unconsciously, to perceive existing social arrangements and institutions as just and legitimate (Jost and Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek, 2004). Acknowledging that one is forced to conform to the rules, norms, and conventions of a system that is illegitimate, unfair, and undesirable is likely to provoke considerable anxiety and threat (Kay, Gaucher, Napier *et al.*, 2008). When little can be done to change this reality, people will likely be motivated to justify their system to reduce these negative feelings and regain a sense of control over their environment (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher *et al.*, 2009b). Indeed, a study by Jost, Blount, Pfeffer *et al.* (2003) investigated ethical inferences concerning real and hypothetical companies and found that people generally believed that profitable companies are more ethical than companies posting losses. That is, those who achieved success must be deserving of it and can be trusted. In the current context, this research suggests that individuals, motivated to avoid uncomfortable feelings of threat, will be increasingly inclined to view an authority in a positive light as that authority's power increases. People may be motivated to perceive power holders as moral and ethical because such perceptions reassure them that the authorities who have control over their outcomes are benevolent and trustworthy.

System justification motives are particularly likely to be active in those low in power due to the nature of lacking power. Being subject to others' control is a generally aversive and threatening experience. There is often little low-power individuals can do about their situation, as those higher in rank control resources, outcomes, and the opportunities available to those below. Low-power individuals may have no choice but to accept the hierarchy. As such, these people are likely to adopt a system-justifying mind-set. In line with this idea, Kay, Gaucher, Peach *et al.* (2009a) found that individuals generally viewed existing power arrangements as more desirable than alternative arrangements, but this was especially true for those high in system dependence (the degree to which they felt their outcomes were dependent on the given system). Stevens and Fiske (2000) similarly found that evaluation-dependent individuals worked to form a positive impression of a power holder, discounting negative information about him or her. Thus, the more an individual feels dependent on and vulnerable to particular power holders – the more power the power

holders wield over this individual – the more motivated the individual should be to view them in a positive light, trusting them more to do the right thing and generally showing more support for them.

If subordinates are assuming morality on the part of power holders in part to legitimize their situation, then explicit legitimacy information should moderate this effect. When individuals are explicitly told that a power holder obtained his or her position through illegitimate means, system justification becomes futile: The hierarchical relationship is overtly unjust and unfair. The illegitimate power holder will then not benefit from the "rosy halo" normally obtained via system justification. Instead, these power holders will need to provide evidence of their moral credentials.

Another possible explanation for the "leaders' rosy halo" follows from the previously mentioned association between power and attention. High-power individuals attract more attention than low-power individuals (Ratcliff *et al.*, 2011). Due to diffusion of responsibility (Darley and Latané, 1968), with so many eyes likely to be watching, individuals may assume that someone else will be monitoring the power holders, so they feel little need to obtain direct evidence of power holders' behavior themselves. After all, if power holders are so prominent and visible, someone is likely to be keeping an eye on them, so they should be less likely to behave immorally. That is, the powerful may be seen as more moral not only because of perceivers' motivation to see them as such but also because perceivers simply assume that power holders lack the latitude to transgress, even if they wanted to, because all eyes are on them.

Finally, the disconnect between the maxim "power corrupts" and our arguments that perceivers likely see power holders as moral may reflect the general disconnect between evaluations of a group and evaluations of any one of that group's individual members. In a classic study of the relationship between intergroup attitudes and behavior towards out-group members, the sociologist Richard LaPiere traveled with a Chinese couple around the USA in the 1930s, when there was widespread prejudice against Asians. Over the course of the trip, only one out of 251 hotels and restaurants refused to serve the couple. However, when LaPiere later contacted managers at the same hotels and restaurants and asked if they would serve a Chinese couple, over 90% of those who responded said they would not (LaPiere, 1934).

It seems that general attitudes towards a group are often a poor predictor of behavior towards specific individuals (e.g., Azjen and Fishbein, 1977). In the case of power holders and morality, why might individuals err on the side of perceiving individual power holders more positively than power holders in general? Individual power holders are close to us:

Our outcomes are determined by them (Magee and Smith, 2013). This level of closeness and dependency makes it difficult to view them so negatively (e.g., Stevens and Fiske, 2000). Furthermore, individuals know more specific information about any one particular power holder than about power holders in general. The presence of more information about an individual group member, especially information that is irrelevant to the stereotype of the greater group, weakens the relationship between attitudes towards the group and behavior towards the individual, particularly when the individual is a member of an out-group (Fein and Hilton, 1992). Thus, because subordinates tend to know individuating information about those who hold power over them, they will be less likely to apply a general "power corrupts" stereotype to these individuals and instead will view them more favorably.

Consistent with this argument, Critcher and Dunning (2013) showed that perceivers tend to expect more moral behaviors from an individual than from the population that individual is a part of. Specifically, a randomly selected individual (e.g., an undergraduate at one's university) was thought more likely to engage in moral or selfless behaviors (e.g., giving money to the homeless) than the full population (e.g., the entire student body). Similarly, Sears (1983) found that perceivers rated individual politicians (e.g., specific US senators) more positively than politicians in general. In like manner, we suspect that individual power holders may be seen in positive moral terms even as the "power corrupts" group stereotype persists.

Evidence for the rosy halo

Little work has explicitly examined how perceivers regard the powerful, but a recent series of studies offers support for our arguments. Overbeck, Tost, and Wazlawek (2013) asked participants to directly report their impressions of power holders' moral character – the holding of moral values and willingness to act on those values (cf. Hogan, 1973) – and found consistent evidence contradicting the "power corrupts" perspective. In an initial online experiment, participants were asked to imagine a single target person. The only information participants were given about this person was that he or she possessed either a low-power or a high-power position in an organization. Power was explicitly defined in terms of control over the distribution of valued resources and decision-making about personnel. Participants then rated this target person on eight different attributes, all relating to moral character (e.g., "X models ethical conduct," "X lacks a strong moral compass"). In contrast to the common belief that power is associated with corruption, participants rated the

high-power target person as being significantly higher in moral character than the low-power target person.

Of course, this experiment used very minimal descriptions and asked about a hypothetical target, which may elicit different responses than specific real-life power holders. Thus, Overbeck *et al.* (2013) next sought to test the relation between power and moral judgments in the context of real authorities and organizations. In a follow-up study, they took advantage of the presence of a variety of high-power individuals in an executive education class on leadership to see how these real-life power holders were perceived by the employees who reported directly to them. In this survey, the direct reports rated their supervisor's level of power and his/her moral character (e.g., "takes responsibility for doing what is right," "argues for high ethical standards"). Replicating the results of the first study, this study found that the more power the supervisor had, the more he or she was judged to have high moral character.

How far does this assumption of morality go? That is, to what extent do individuals give power holders the benefit of the doubt? Overbeck *et al.* were interested in the degree to which this assumption of morality on the part of power holders might substitute for other signs of trustworthiness. Transparency – the open provision and availability of information regarding decision-making – can act as a heuristic for gauging someone's moral status. Not only does transparency allow for greater surveillance of a person's behavior to ensure the person complies with moral norms, but the willingness to be transparent serves as a signal that the person plans to comply with these norms in the first place. Thus, the more a perceiver knows about the processes and reasons behind a person's decisions, the more easily the perceiver should be persuaded that this person is behaving in line with moral norms (Rawlins, 2008). However, if a perceiver is predisposed to view the authority as moral for reasons separate from transparency, then the authority's transparency is likely to be less critical in determining judgments of morality. That is, when the perceiver already has other reasons for presuming the authority to be moral, transparency is a less essential signal, both because in such a situation transparency offers little new information diagnostic of the authority's morality and because surveillance is seen as less necessary. Therefore, if power holders are by default assumed to be moral, whether or not they are transparent regarding their decision-making processes will have less impact on judgments of their morality: Even a tight-lipped power holder will be judged as relatively moral.

In the second study, participants also rated their supervisor's transparency in terms of the provision of explanations for decisions (i.e., "is careful to explain his/her decisions," "explains how decisions are made"). Transparency was positively related to judgments of the supervisor's moral character, but this was moderated by an interaction with the supervisor's power. There was a stronger positive effect of transparency when supervisors were perceived as having a low rather than a high level of power (see Figure 4.1). Though being transparent also helped high-power supervisors to be judged as more moral, it did not help them as much as low-power supervisors. In fact, they did not need the boost: High-power supervisors who were low in transparency were still judged to be relatively moral.

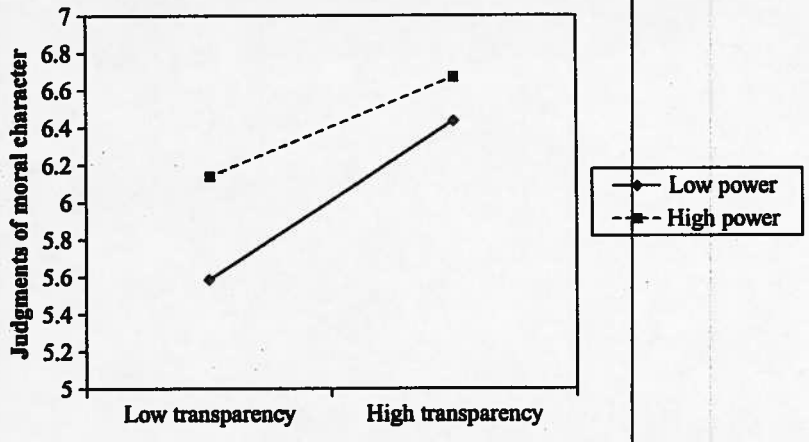

Figure 4.1 Effect of supervisors' power and transparency on judgments of their moral character.

One important implication of these effects regards the degree to which subordinates support their supervisors. Trust in the moral integrity of a colleague is a key determinant of support for him or her (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Transparency, as it increases perceptions of a colleague as moral, should increase support for that colleague (Norman, Avolio, and Luthans, 2010). However, if an observer is predisposed to perceive power holders as moral and ethical, transparency should have less of an effect on support because it provides the observer with little new information regarding the power holder's worthiness for support. Indeed, when participants indicated the degree to which they evaluated their supervisor positively (e.g., "is an exceptional leader"), there was a significant interaction between power and transparency. Again transparency had a stronger effect when supervisors were perceived as having a low rather than a high level of power (see Figure 4.2). Notably, although high-power supervisors with high transparency were judged most positively,

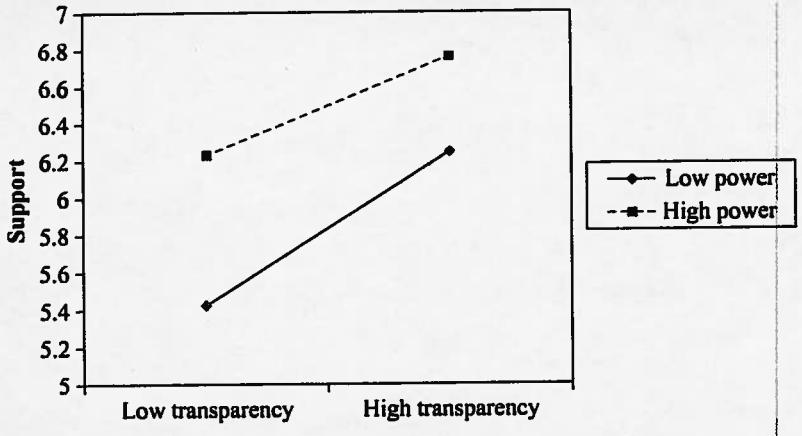

Figure 4.2 Effect of supervisors' power and transparency on support for them.

high-power supervisors with low transparency were still judged at least as positively as low-power supervisors with high or low transparency. Further analyses revealed that these effects were partially mediated by perceptions of moral character. In other words, high power appears to foster perceptions of morality, and these perceptions lead to increased support on the part of subordinates, even in the absence of transparency.

Across both an experiment involving hypothetical targets varying in power and a field survey involving subordinates and supervisors in ongoing power relationships, Overbeck *et al.* (2013) found that more powerful individuals were judged to have higher moral character. Furthermore, this assumption of the greater morality of power holders was strong enough that high-power individuals did not need to be transparent regarding their decision-making processes to be seen as moral and to receive support from their subordinates. Rather than "power corrupts," people seem to assume that "power purifies."

Overbeck *et al.* (2013) further tested the boundaries of perceivers' credulity by examining university students' reactions to ostensible budget cuts at their university. All participants read a description of a fictional person, Mark Jones, supposedly the university's head treasury officer (HTO), who was said to be leading a budget-cutting and allocation process at their university. In these descriptions Mark varied in terms of the power he held, the legitimacy of his position, and his transparency about recent decisions. Mark was described as having either low power (e.g., "there are a lot of restrictions on his authority") or high power

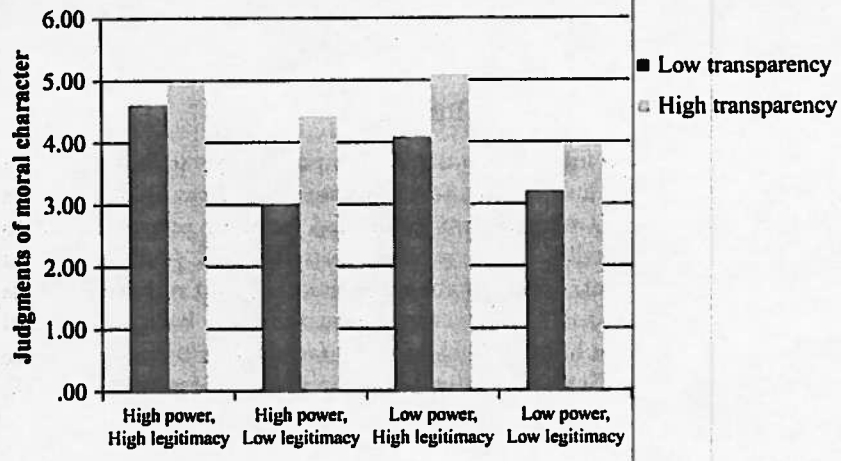

Figure 4.3 Effect of supervisors' power, legitimacy, and transparency on judgments of their moral character.

(e.g., "he can essentially make the decision without any restrictions on his authority"). He either had "not much experience in this area" and was appointed by a family member to the position (low legitimacy), or had "extensive experience and a long list of accomplishments" and was elected to his position democratically (high legitimacy). Finally, he either had been providing "very little information" about recent decisions (low transparency) or had "issued a report providing extensive details about these decisions" (high transparency). After reading the description of Mark, participants rated how much morality-related descriptions (e.g., "ethical," "selfish") applied to Mark and how much they supported Mark (e.g., "I'm comfortable looking to Mark Jones for leadership").

As predicted, the effect of transparency on judgments of Mark's moral character depended on Mark's level of power and the legitimacy of that power (see Figure 4.3). As in the previous study, more transparency was always beneficial for Mark when he was low in power, regardless of the legitimacy of his position, and transparency did not matter when he had high, legitimate power, as he was then always viewed as being high in moral character. However, when Mark's power was high yet illegitimate, things changed: Here he was viewed as being higher in moral character the more transparent he was. Once participants had clear evidence that Mark's position could not be justified, they could no longer default to viewing him as moral and instead needed concrete evidence of his

character. Similar effects were found on the amount of support participants were willing to give Mark.

Conclusions and implications

On the surface, the idea that "power corrupts" seems to be taken as a given, trotted out by journalists and newscasters anytime a leader behaves scandalously. In this chapter, we attempted to bring some nuance to this blunt generalization. First, we demonstrated how power does not necessarily have a corrupting effect on individuals, but rather that both positive and negative effects may stem from the same basic, functional cognitive mechanism of power holders' greater abstract thinking (Magee and Smith, 2013). We also explained how the distinctive nature of having power can lead power holders to appear to be more immoral, even when they are not behaving any worse than everyone else.

Second, we discussed why, despite the apparent ubiquity of "power corrupts," people might instead default to assuming that an individual power holder, especially one who directly wields power over them personally, will actually be more moral than someone lacking in power. Assuming by default that power holders are moral and thus can be trusted and supported may help low-power individuals cope with the threatening nature of their position. Indeed, when power holders clearly do not deserve the position they hold, they again need to provide evidence that they are behaving ethically before they are seen as moral and ethical. The attention that power holders grab may lead others to assume that power holders will behave morally because they are being watched. Additionally, people may still hold the stereotype that power holders in general are corrupt, but various cognitive processes lead this stereotype not to be applied to specific power holders.

Third, we discussed data supporting this idea of the "leader's rosy halo." One consequence is that power holders have less of a need to demonstrate they are indeed behaving ethically (e.g., by being transparent) in order to be seen as moral and ethical.

This chapter offers a number of theoretical and practical contributions. To begin, we hope to push the discussion of what power does to those who possess it further away from black-and-white debates of "it's bad" versus "it's good," to more nuanced considerations of exactly what power does to people, when, and why. Power is a fundamental dimension of human relationships and a primary method of organizing social relations (Cartwright, 1959; Fiske, 1992). Hierarchies often facilitate coordination, reduce conflict, and satisfy the human need for order and stability (Magee and Galinsky, 2008); in other words, they persist in part because

they are functional. If all power holders were by definition corrupt, the world would quickly dissolve into chaos. Furthermore, proposing that power is inherently bad may be seen as its own form of system justification, a way of letting those without power feel that they actually are in the better position (Kay and Jost, 2003).

Next, we echo many recent researchers in emphasizing the importance of putting the right people into positions of power (e.g., Galinsky *et al.*, 2008). Power reveals the person. It gives power holders external support to pursue their goals by providing access to resources and removing barriers and constraints (Keltner *et al.*, 2003). It also gives power holders internal support by helping them ignore distractions and stay goal-focused (DeWall *et al.*, 2011; Guinote, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2008b). It is thus critical to select, for positions of power, people who hold the sorts of goals that are most beneficial for the group (e.g., Karremans and Smith, 2010; Overbeck and Park, 2006). In this way, one can be more certain that power holders will indeed "do the right thing." This certainty is especially important given that people's default appears to be not to check for hard evidence of right- or wrongdoing on the part of power holders.

We also extend existing research on how status and power differences affect social judgments (e.g., Fragale, Overbeck, and Neale, 2011) by demonstrating that individuals do not always make negative assumptions about power holders. The studies of Overbeck *et al.* (2013) demonstrate that power is positively associated with judgments of moral character and diminished needs for transparency. Such a pattern stands in stark contrast both to previous literature and to scholarly and popular discourse. Given the surprising nature of these findings, follow-up research is necessary to determine the underlying mechanisms of this effect, as well as potential boundary conditions. Recent research has shown that, when individuals' sense of personal control is threatened, they respond in a compensatory manner by heightening their sense of external order and control; among other things, they tend to bolster their sense of the legitimacy of authorities (Kay *et al.*, 2009b), consistent with our findings.

Finally, our arguments – and the evidence supplied by Overbeck *et al.* (2013) – underscore an important caution: Credulity towards the powerful creates vulnerability. With legitimately acquired power, an actor can behave more freely, with fewer constraints and less demand for transparency. Yet this very freedom may foster less moral behavior, as suggested in recent work by Lammers and colleagues (2010) and Gruenfeld and colleagues (2008). As such, organizations would be well served by implementing formal systems that preserve transparency and compensate for members' natural tendency to forgo monitoring of the powerful.

Abraham Lincoln has been quoted (probably erroneously; Leidner, n.d.) as saying, "If you want to test a man's character, give him power." Similarly, we argue that power can be associated with corruption or morality, depending on the character of the power holder and the circumstances under which he or she holds power. And, despite the common belief that power corrupts, individual perceivers judging individual power holders tend to show trust, credulity, latitude, and support towards the powerful. This may ease the burdens of subordinate status among all those who lack power, but, sadly, it does little to prevent the kinds of abuse reviewed at the start of this chapter.

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5 "Power corrupts" revisited: the role of construal of power as opportunity or responsibility

Kai Sassenberg, Naomi Ellemers, Daan Scheepers, and Annika Scholl

With the recent financial crises the stereotype that power corrupts returned to public discussion. The news media have often asked why bankers took such high risks to increase their personal income while they seemingly ignored the responsibility resulting from the fact that others' savings and pensions depend on the bankers' behavior. Indeed, the definition of power as the asymmetrical control over others' outcomes might suggest that those in power primarily consider the *opportunities* social power represents. But is it true that power holders mostly overlook the *responsibility* resulting from the fact that they can provide or withhold others' access to desired outcomes? Do they forget that those low in power depend on them, or are vulnerable to the effects of their actions? And does this depend on individual preferences in terms of interest in power and the motivation to achieve power in the first place?

The present chapter provides an answer to these questions about the construal of power as opportunity and responsibility, in three steps. First, we review research providing insights into whether power leads to self-serving behavior (i.e., making use of the opportunity power provides) or to the consideration of others' perspectives and interests (i.e., the responsibility for others), in order to answer the question of whether there is a truth in the stereotype that power corrupts. This review will be embedded in a brief summary of the main theoretical approaches to power in social psychology. Second, we introduce the distinction between the construal of power as opportunity versus responsibility and current research on the impact of construal of power on interest in power. These studies provide an answer to the question of whether the construal of power as opportunity is indeed what motivates people to strive for power in the first place – if so, that would provide a reason why power is in many cases treated as opportunity (i.e., leads to more selfish behavior). Third,