

When the Powerless Rise Up: Power Leads to Positive Action, But Only When Acquired Legitimately

June 16, 2008

In an effort to reconcile the science stating that power leads to action and lack of power leads to inhibition — despite constant historical reminders of the powerless rising up and taking action — new research in the June issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that the legitimacy of the power relationship is an important determinant of whether power leads to action.

The research, led in part by Kellogg School of Management Professor Adam Galinsky, sought to determine at what point the powerless rise up and take action. Galinsky collaborated with psychologist Joris Lammers of Tilburg University and Ernestine Gordijn and Sabine Otten of the University of Groningen on the study. These findings are the first to clarify *when*, and lend insight into *why*, power leads to behavioral approach, or action.

According to the researchers, when power is acquired or wielded legitimately (e.g., following a fair election or when actions are within authority), the likelihood for a successful cooperative environment is high, with the powerful leading and the powerless following. However, if power is borne of illegitimate means (in fixed elections or self-interested actions that exceed authority) this can motivate force and resistance from the powerless.

“Power activates a person’s behavioral approach system and underlies our motivation to act, while powerlessness activates our behavioral inhibition system to restrict action and risk-taking,” said Galinsky. “But, in illegitimate power scenarios, the powerless are more likely to act without direction in an attempt to change the situation, and the powerful may inhibit their actions for fear of losing their undeserved seat at the top.”

In a series of experiments, the research team investigated the effect that legitimate or illegitimate power has on approach behavior. The results in this month’s *Psychological Science* are revealing. The research shows that when given legitimate power, participants were more likely to take action than those legitimately assigned to a position of powerlessness. When power was conceived illegitimately, the powerful no longer took more action and risks than the powerless. This increased action also manifested itself in various other ways, such as a higher propensity to haggle when making a purchase.

In one study, when women were assigned to either the position of boss or employee legitimately (based on their scores on a leadership test), the powerful took more risks than the powerless. But when these women scored highly on the leadership test but were told that the researchers preferred to have a man in the position, the employees took more risks than the women assigned to illegitimate power (they had scored poorly but the researchers assigned them to the boss position because they wanted a women in charge). Furthermore, these effects were so robust that even if participants simply thought back about similar events that happened in the past (such as a student becoming president of her fraternity after

fixed elections) the same effects occurred.

“These findings demonstrate that how power is conceptualized, acquired and wielded determines its psychological consequences,” conclude the authors.