CHAPTER 1

General Introduction

From ancient empires to modern-day organizations, many leaders, both in the political as well as business arena, have been, and still are, preoccupied with power. There are examples of leaders who are strongly motivated to acquire more power, leaders who fear that they might soon lose their power, and/or leaders who have been corrupted by their power. In a world with substantial power differences, where powerful leaders make decisions that affect millions of lives, it seems crucial to understand how power affects its holders.

This dissertation examines power in an organizational context. Power, defined as asymmetric control over valued resources, is a fundamental feature of organizations (Flynn, Gruenfeld, Molm, & Polzer, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Leaders at the top of the organizational hierarchy control valued resources, such as the financial bonuses and task assignments of other employees. Employees who occupy relatively low-power positions in organizations, on the other hand, depend on their leaders for such valued resources. It is hard to overestimate the importance of power for organizational life. Indeed, power is such a fundamental feature of organizations that Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips (2006, p. 3) remarked that “power is to the organization as oxygen is to breathing”.

Considering the important role of power in society and in organizations, it is unsurprising that social scientists have long been interested in power (Foucault, 1980; Russell, 1938; Weber, 1947). Following this interest, in the past decades, a wealth of social psychological research has empirically examined the consequences of power (Fiske, 1993; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Guinote, 2007). Individuals with higher power, for instance, think more abstractly (Smith & Trope, 2006), experience less empathy (van Kleef et al., 2008), and take greater risk (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) than less powerful individuals. Although this line of work has greatly advanced our understanding of power and its
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consequences, there are still important topics within the power literature that require further attention.

Firstly, the academic literature addressing power has primarily conceptualized power as a fixed and stable construct (Galinsky et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). In real-life settings, however, power is more dynamic, as power relations change over time (Flynn et al., 2011; Schaerer, Lee, Galinsky, & Thau, 2018). In fact, in organizational contexts, power is often challenged and renegotiated and power shifts have become an increasingly common attribute of current organizational life (Greer, Van Bunderen, & Yu, 2017; Wisse, Rus, Keller, & Sleebos, 2019). In today’s organizations, powerful leaders might thus fear that they will soon lose their power, while relatively powerless employees might believe that they will be promoted to higher ranked positions in the near future. Considering this ubiquity of power (in)stability in modern-day organizations, it seems crucial to consider a more dynamic approach to power, and also take into account its instability. The first aim of this dissertation is to do exactly this, as I examine intrapersonal (Chapter 2) and interpersonal (Chapter 3) consequences of unstable power in organizations.

Secondly, abundant anecdotal evidence suggests that power corrupts those who possess it. In line with this negative view of power, the academic literature addressing power has often conceptualized power as a corrupting force, identifying detrimental consequences of power, such as stealing (Yap, Wazlawek, Lucas, Cuddy, & Carney, 2013), lying (Boles, Croson, & Murnighan, 2000), and derogating others (Kipnis, 1972). A rapidly accumulating body of research suggests, however, that the association between power and unethical behavior is more complex (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Lammers, Galinsky, Dubois, & Rucker, 2015; Pitesa & Thau, 2013b). Considering these findings, it seems important to move beyond the classic notion that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Lord Acton, 1887), and also focus on circumstances under which power might
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discourage unethical behavior of those who possess it. The second aim of this dissertation is to do exactly this, as I identify conditions and psychological processes that may restrain powerholders’ misconduct (Chapter 4).

Overall, this dissertation aims to further the academic understanding of power in meaningful ways. First, this dissertation moves towards a more dynamic view of power by illustrating that the (in)stability of power hierarchies should be considered in order to fully understand the consequences of power in organizations. Second, this dissertation aims to move towards a more nuanced view of power and unethical behavior by showing that power is not always a corrupting force (see also DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceranic, 2012; Schmid & Schmid Mast, 2013; Smith & Magee, 2015). Furthermore, in addressing these two issues, this dissertation combines experimental research designs with survey-based research designs to study the experiences of actual powerholders in organizational field settings, thereby increasing the much-needed ecological validity of power research (Flynn et al., 2011).

Overall, this dissertation aims to shine more light on one of the most fundamental constructs in organizations: power.

In this introduction, I first give a definition of power. I then provide an overview of this dissertation by identifying two key subjects in the power literature that require further attention and describing how this dissertation’s empirical chapters address these two critical topics.

What is Power?

Power has a long research tradition, and academics from different fields have studied power at a wide variety of levels, such as the societal-, group-, dyadic-, and individual-level (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Pfeffer & Salanick, 1978; Pratto & Sidanius, 1999; Winter, 1988). Consequently, there are many definitions of power, some focusing on power as an ability of an individual (Weber, 1947), while others emphasize the premise that power is a
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social concept (Emerson, 1962). In this dissertation, I adopt the most widely-used definition of power in the social psychological literature, defining power as asymmetrical control over valued resources (Dépret & Fiske, 1993; Fiske, 2010; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

By adopting this definition, it becomes apparent that this dissertation focuses on social power, as opposed to personal power. The latter refers to a person’s ability to bring out intended effects (Lammers, Stoker, & Stapel, 2009; Overbeck & Park, 2001). In contrast, social power reflects a dependency between two or more parties, in which the powerful depend less on the powerless for valued resources than vice versa (Emerson, 1962). In organizational contexts, for example, leaders have more power than their subordinates do, as leaders typically control subordinates’ salaries, promotions, and demotions. Subordinates, on the other hand, are largely dependent on their leaders for such decisions and resources.

The valued resources that powerholders, such as organizational leaders, control can be both positive or negative (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Positive resources refer to rewards that lower-power individuals generally desire and want more of, such as a financial bonuses or social approval. Negative resources, on the other hand, refer to punishments that lower-power individuals typically desire less of or fear, such as assignment to undesirable tasks or demotions. Furthermore, as the above examples illustrate, these resources can be both physical (i.e., money, food, or economic security) and social (i.e., social approval, affection, or information; Keltner et al., 2003).

Another important aspect of these resources is that they ought to be valued by at least one of the two parties (Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Organizational leaders, for example, have more power than their subordinates do, because leaders control the financial compensation of their subordinates and because subordinates typically value the level of their financial compensation (i.e., they find it important to receive higher
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payments). In other words, the value of the controlled resources determines the degree of
dependence between the two parties, and, consequently, the degree to which the powerful
can enforce their will and influence the relatively powerless (Cartwright, 1965; Tost, 2015).

Defining power in this way clearly separates it from the related concept of status
(Blader & Chen, 2012). Although both power and status represent fundamental dimensions of
social hierarchies, these two constructs are distinct (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Power refers
to the amount of valued resources an individual controls, while status refers to how other
people perceive an individual’s standing within a group (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring,
2001; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). As such, an individual can have power without having status
and can have status without having power (Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012). Indeed, prior
research has shown that status has different, and sometimes even opposing, effects as
compared to power (Blader & Chen, 2012; Blader, Shirako, & Chen, 2016).

Overview of this Dissertation

Power and power (in)stability. Over the past decades, abundant social psychological
research examined the consequences of power. An important finding in this regard is that
having power increases approach-related behaviors and cognitions (i.e., positive affect,
attention to rewards, automatic information processing, and disinhibited behavior), while
lacking power elicits inhibition tendencies (i.e., negative affect, attention to threats, controlled
information processing, and inhibited behavior; Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Anderson &
Galinsky, 2006; Boksem, Smolders, & Cremer, 2012; Keltner et al., 2003). This and related
work has greatly advanced our understanding of power and its consequences.

As a next step, this dissertation aims to move beyond this important line of work by
taking a more dynamic perspective on power. Indeed, in real life organizational settings,
power is often unstable (Flynn et al., 2011; Schaerer et al., 2018). Power (in)stability refers to
the degree of actual or perceived mutability of one’s position in the power hierarchy
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(Cummings, 1980; Lammers, Stoker, Jordan, Pollmann, & Stapel, 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Henri Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When a power hierarchy is stable, power positions are fixed and unchangeable. In an unstable power hierarchy, on the other hand, there is a possibility for change, such that higher-power individuals can lose their control over valued resources and/or lower-power individuals can gain control over such resources. Lower-power individuals, for instance, can climb a power hierarchy by developing certain skills or by gaining experience. Higher-power individuals, on the other hand, can lose their power positions because of external turbulence, harsh competition, or because of their own wrongdoings (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012).

Considering the high prevalence of power (in)stability in organizations, it seems vital to examine organizational consequences of power (in)stability. This dissertation therefore examines power (in)stability in an organizational field setting and identifies key organizational outcomes of power (in)stability. Specifically, Chapter 2 identifies important intrapersonal consequences of power (in)stability (i.e., work stress). Moreover, Chapter 3 identifies important interpersonal consequences of power (in)stability (i.e., distrust and lack of power sharing). By doings so, this dissertation moves towards a more dynamic view of power, showing the important role of power (in)stability in understanding the consequences of power in organizations.

**Intrapersonal consequences of power (in)stability.** Scholars initially demonstrated the importance of power (in)stability among groups of non-human primates (Sapolsky, 1993, 2005). Particularly, this line of highly influential work showed that power and its (in)stability critically shape animal’s stress levels. As power offers animals many benefits, such as shelter, access to food, and mating opportunities, researchers found that animals higher in the power hierarchy experienced more stress when the hierarchy was unstable compared to when the hierarchy was stable (Manuck, Marsland, Kaplan, & Williams, 1995; Sapolsky & Share,
1994, 2004). Lower-power animals, on the other hand, experienced most stress when the hierarchy was stable, as opposed to unstable, because of their impossible prospects for resource gains; essentially, they were stuck with what they were allotted (Sapolsky, 1993, 2005). The (in)stability of the power hierarchy thus seemed to have a profound impact on these animals (e.g., chimpanzees, baboons and wolves).

Several theories suggest that power and its (in)stability might similarly impact humans’ stress experiences as well. The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1981), in particular, argues that individuals are motivated to acquire and protect valued resources and are threatened by the potential or actual loss of such resources. As such, this theory proposes that “resource loss is the principal ingredient in the stress response” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 303). Moreover, to date, first experimental research examined the impact of power and its (in)stability for humans’ stress levels, showing that individuals assigned to unstable high-power and stable-low power positions experience more stress, compared to individuals assigned to stable high-power and unstable low-power positions (Jordan, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2011).

Although the work of Jordan and colleagues (2011) has greatly advanced our understanding of how power and its (in)stability interact to shape humans’ stress levels, this work was conducted among student participants in an experimental research setting, and the authors predominantly based their argumentation on findings and reasoning from animal research. Therefore, important issues regarding the findings’ generalizability to organizational field settings, in particular, remain to be resolved. Chapter 2 addresses these issues. Specifically, Chapter 2 examines the role of power and power (in)stability for organizational members’ work stress. Replicating prior laboratory findings among a sample of organizational members, this chapter shows that individuals in unstable high-power and stable low-power
positions experience more work stress compared to individuals in stable high-power and unstable low-power positions.

Moreover, Chapter 2 shows that, in organizational contexts, the interactive relationship of power and its (in)stability with stress is more complex than researchers previously assumed, and is moderated by organizational members’ social dominance orientation (SDO). SDO refers to the extent to which individuals prefer hierarchical differentiation, with individuals higher in SDO preferring unequal power relations more strongly than those lower in SDO (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Pratto & Sidanius, 1999). The findings in this chapter show that individuals higher (but not lower) in SDO experience more stress in unstable high-power and stable low-power positions compared to stable high-power and unstable low-power positions. By doing so, the research presented in Chapter 2 suggests that in organizational contexts, power not only affords individuals material resources (e.g., money, shelter, and nourishment), but also the fulfillment of psychological needs that are particularly important in organizational settings (e.g., autonomy and status), and whose value differs between individuals.

**Interpersonal consequences of power (in)stability.** This dissertation further proposes that power (in)stability does not only have important intrapersonal consequences, but also has important consequences for how powerholders perceive and treat the people around them. Hence, Chapter 3 examines the interpersonal consequences of power (in)stability. Particularly, in Chapter 3, I argue and show that leaders who feel that their power is unstable are particularly motivated to protect their power, which results in detrimental consequences for how they perceive and act towards their employees.

Several theories on social hierarchies have highlighted the motivation of powerholders to protect their power (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Pratto & Sidanius, 1999). Social dominance theory (Pratto & Sidanius, 1999), in particular, argues that members of relatively
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Powerful groups are motivated to protect and justify existing power hierarchies in society, because such maintenance and justification protects the benefits they obtain from occupying a privileged position in society. Consequently, in order to stabilize and justify existing power arrangements, powerful groups adopt and spread ideologies that the powerful (and powerless) deserve their positions in the social hierarchy, as well as the (lack of) resources and privileges that accompany these positions (Pratto & Sidanius, 1999; Sidanius, Pratto, Van Laar, & Levin, 2004).

At the individual level, similar processes seem to operate. As mentioned above, power affords individual leaders many benefits (i.e., access to resources, status, and autonomy; Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), and consequently, leaders are strongly motivated to protect their power (Fehr, Herz, & Wilkening, 2012; Mooijman, van Dijk, Ellemers, & van Dijk, 2015). These protective tendencies are particularly pronounced when powerholders feel that their power is unstable (Williams, 2014). In such situations, higher-power individuals therefore act in ways that protect their power by, for instance, derogating the powerless (Georgesen & Harris, 1998, 2006), hindering their team members’ performance and collaborations (Case & Maner, 2014; Maner & Mead, 2010) or by closely monitoring their team members’ behaviors (Mead & Maner, 2012).

Chapter 3 aims to extend this line of important work by examining, across five studies, the impact of power (in)stability for leaders’ willingness to share their power with employees (i.e., delegating responsibility and authority and incooperating employees’ ideas in their decisions; Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011). As power sharing requires leaders to relinquish at least part of their power to lower-level employees (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Ratcliff, Vescio, & Dahl, 2015), I argue and show that unstable power undermines a leader’s power sharing. Considering the wide range of benefits of power sharing, for leaders themselves, but also for their employees and organizations (e.g., Auh, Menguc, & Jung, 2014;
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Huang, Iun, Liu, & Gong, 2010; Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2010), it seems crucial to identify such psychological barriers towards leaders’ power sharing.

Furthermore, to date, little attention has been paid to identifying psychological mechanisms that could help explain the behavioral consequences of power (in)stability. To completely understand the behavioral responses of power (in)stability, however, it seems vital to identify such underlying mechanisms. Therefore, Chapter 3 further focuses on why power (in)stability hinders leaders’ power sharing and examines the mediating role of distrust in this regard. The findings presented in this chapter show that a leader who feels that his or her power is unstable distrust others, and that these increased feelings of distrust, in turn, diminish a leader’s willingness to share power with his or her employees.

Moreover, following previous research (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Dimoka, 2010), I make a distinction between leaders’ emotional assessment of employees’ ill will (i.e., benevolence distrust; McKnight & Chervany, 2001) and leaders’ cognitive assessment of employees’ capabilities (i.e., ability distrust; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). I aim to show that these two dimensions of distrust can explain leaders’ lack of power sharing with different employees. That is, I propose that certain employees present a different threat to those whose power is unstable than do other employees. Specifically, I propose that while unstable power hinders leaders’ power sharing with relatively senior employees because leaders distrust their benevolence, unstable power hinders leaders’ power sharing with relatively junior employees because leaders distrust their abilities. The findings presented in Chapter 3 support the notion that unstable power is associated with diminished power sharing because leaders distrust their employees’ benevolence as well as abilities. It further shows that employee seniority moderates the indirect association between unstable power and power sharing, via benevolence (but not ability) distrust, such that this particular indirect relationship is more pronounced for relatively senior (compared to junior) employees. By doing so, Chapter 3
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furthers the academic understanding of why unstable power hinders leaders’ power sharing with specific employees, and thereby shines greater light on why power sharing, despite its many benefits, remains so elusive in many of today’s organizations.

**Power and Unethical Behavior**

The second topic that I address in this dissertation is the relationship between power and unethical behavior. Throughout history, many have argued that power corrupts. Sorokin and Lunden already debated in 1959, “that the greater, more absolute, and coercive the power of rulers, political leaders, and big executives of business, labor and other organizations, and the less freely this power is approved by the ruled population, the more corrupt and criminal such ruling groups and executives tend to be” (p. 37). A few decades later, Kipnis (1972, 1976) showed that power was associated with an increased attempt to influence and devaluate the powerless, and concluded that power corrupts.

Since then, a wealth of research examined this intriguing research topic, and much of it confirmed the negative side of power (e.g., Giurge, van Dijke, Zheng, & De Cremer, 2019; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Lammers, Stoker, Jordan, Pollmann, & Stapel, 2011). In this regard, scholars have linked power to corruption (Bendahan, Zehnder, Pralong, & Antonakis, 2015) as well as stealing, cheating, and engaging in traffic violations (Yap et al., 2013). Moreover, scholars have shown that, compared to lower-power individuals, higher-power individuals are less concerned with the suffering of others (van Kleef et al., 2008), more likely to dehumanize others (Gwinn, Judd, & Park, 2013; Lammers & Stapel, 2010) and perceive others as objects they can use to achieve their own goals (Gruenfeld et al., 2008).

These negative effects of power are typically explained with the notion that power is associated with increased behavioral freedom and makes individuals less dependent on others (Fast et al., 2009; Keltner et al., 2003). This increased freedom and independence, in turn, elicits a self-focus, causing the relatively powerful to be primarily concerned with their own
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well-being, ignoring the social consequences of their behavior, and disregarding the feelings of others (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Pitesa & Thau, 2013a; van Kleef et al., 2008).

Literature has emerged, however, that offers contradictory findings about the corrupting effects of power (e.g., DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceramic, 2012; Overbeck & Park, 2001; Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). These studies suggest that the experience and possession of power can also enable moral behavior. That is, contrary to the research mentioned above, these studies suggest that power decreases self-interested behavior and increases interpersonal sensitivity (DeCelles et al., 2012b; Schmid Mast et al., 2009).

How can one reconcile these seemingly contradicting findings? The answer to this question may lie in the fact that the increased freedom and independence elicited by power and its increased self-focus, may mean that powerholders, to a great extent, act in accordance with their underlying traits and salient goals (Guinote, 2007). As such, when individuals have anti-social traits or goals power elicits unethical tendencies. However, when individuals have pro-social traits or goals, power enhances ethical tendencies (Chen et al., 2001; DeCelles et al., 2012b).

Overall, this research thus suggests that power does not always corrupt. Instead, a growing body of research suggests that the relationship between power and unethical behavior is more complex and may be more nuanced than previously thought. The present dissertation aims to build on this line of important work by examining conditions and behavior psychological processes that may restrain, rather than encourage, powerholders’ misconduct. Particularly, Chapter 4 examines the important role of self-serving justifications in shaping powerholders’ unethical behavior.

Self-serving justifications are strategies that people adopt to convince themselves that their misconduct is actually not that unethical (Bandura, 1990; Tsang, 2002). Individuals can,
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for instance, justify their unethical behavior by telling themselves that their misconduct was for the greater good or that everybody misbehaves from time to time (Bandura, 1990). Such self-serving justifications allow individuals to act unethically while at the same time thinking of themselves as moral individuals (Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, & Ayal, 2015). As people typically value a moral self-image, they are more inclined to misbehave when such self-serving justifications are easily accessible, compared to when they are not (Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011; Shalvi, Eldar, & Bereby-Meyer, 2012).

To date, scholars have assumed that self-serving justification processes are equally important in shaping misconduct of all organizational members – irrespective of their position in the organizational power hierarchy (Bandura, 1990; Shalvi et al., 2011). Drawing from the situated focus theory of power (Guinote, 2007), however, in Chapter 4, I propose that self-serving justifications are particularly important for determining the unethical behavior of relatively powerful individuals.

Specifically, this theory states that because relatively powerful individuals have greater access to resources, they experience greater freedom to act upon their own goals and desires (Guinote, 2007; Keltner et al., 2003). The powerless, on the other hand, are dependent on others for valued resources, and thus aim to increase the predictability of their environment by focusing their attention outwards (Guinote, 2007). Consequently, higher-power individuals experience more control over their behavior and attend more to their internal states compared to lower-power individuals (Fast et al., 2009; Guinote, 2010).

Building on these notions, in Chapter 4, I propose that self-serving justifications are more important in shaping the misconduct of higher-power compared to lower-power individuals. Freed from social constraint, higher-power individuals may experience increased internal conflict when acting unethically, as they focus more on their internal states and experience greater control over their (unethical) behavior (Fast et al., 2009; Galinsky, Magee,
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Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). Hence, I propose that in order to act unethically, relatively powerful individuals require particular opportunities for self-justification in order to rationalize their misconduct and reduce the internal conflict that may arise from misbehaving. For relatively powerless individuals, on the other hand, it should be easier to rationalize their own misconduct even when self-serving justifications are not readily accessible, as they, by default, more easily blame such behavior on external circumstance (Fast et al., 2009; Galinsky, Magee, et al., 2008). As such, in Chapter 4, I aim to show that self-serving justifications are particularly important in shaping higher-power (as opposed to lower-power) individuals’ misbehavior.

Across two studies, using both an experimental manipulation of power and measuring organizational power in an online field experiment, Chapter 4 shows that higher-power individuals act less unethically when self-serving justifications are not available compared to when justifications are available, while the availability of such self-serving justifications is less important in determining the misconduct of lower-power individuals. By doing so, Chapter 4 contributes to a more complete understanding of the role of self-serving justifications in organizational contexts, and builds towards a more nuanced picture of power and unethical behavior. Specifically the findings presented in Chapter 4 suggest that power is not always a psychologically liberating and corrupting force, but can also constrain the immoral behavior of the individuals who possess it.

Overall, this dissertation aims to addresses two key issues in the power literature. First, in Chapter 2 and 3 I adopt a more dynamic approach to power and examine the intra- and interpersonal consequences of power (in)stability in organizations. Second, in Chapter 4, I demonstrate a more nuanced view of power and unethical behavior by showing the important role self-justifications for powerholders’ engagement in unethical behavior.