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The powerful want to, the powerless have to: Perceived constraint moderates causal attributions

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Abstract

It is popularly believed that powerful people enjoy a nearly-absolute lack of constraints, and that powerless people suffer under overwhelming constraints; in fact, such differences largely define the social categories of 'powerful person' and 'powerless person.' This association of power-related social categories and constraint constitutes a stereotype that may lead perceivers to overlook other, more diagnostic information when explaining others' behavior. As a result, the actions of powerholders may tend to be seen as dispositionally motivated and those of the powerless as situationally motivated. This should occur because of both real differences in constraint, and bias in the failure to account for other, more diagnostic information about constraint. Two studies support these predictions. In Study 1, participants judged powerless workers as more situationally motivated, especially under coercion, than both controls and powerholders, who were judged as more dispositional. In Study 2, given more fine-grained information about constraints and power, participants' attributions reflected both accurate use of this information and bias. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

One way in which powerful people seem fortunate is that they seem able to do whatever they want. Powerless people, on the other hand, are subject to limitations and the control of others. As a result, when we hear about the actions of the powerful, we interpret them differently from those of people who are powerless; we may assume that the powerholder intended his or her action, but the powerless person was simply forced—by circumstance or a stronger party—to act. For example, imagine that you go to work on Monday and hear that John, a member of your department, was working all weekend. How do you and your co-workers explain John's behavior? In this paper, we suggest that you will use John's power in the organization as a cue about the likely causes of his behavior. We suggest that if John is a lowly employee, you may assume that he was compelled to be there. If John is the boss, however, you might be more likely to assume that he chose to be there, that his behavior reflected his own volition or even desire.

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Among social psychologists, it is widely agreed that people tend to make dispositional attributions for others' behavior. That is, any observed behavior—cutting someone off in traffic, choosing a particular career path, or writing an opinion essay—is generally believed to reflect the actor's own disposition or preferences, a phenomenon known as 'the correspondence bias' or 'the fundamental attribution error' (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Harris, 1967; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Quattrone, 1982; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977). However, we suggest that this tendency toward dispositional attribution is affected by the power of the person whose actions are observed. In this paper, we explore how actors' power affects attributions made about their actions, and factors that may moderate the effects. Specifically, we propose that perceivers' tendency to make more dispositional attributions should be particularly pronounced with respect to *powerful* actors, whereas their attributions about *powerless* actors have a more situationalist flavor.

POWER AND POWERLESSNESS

Although power is a slippery concept, it has been defined as the 'production of intended effects,' (Weber, 1946), triumph over others despite opposition (Dahl, 1957), and control over outcomes (Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Overbeck & Park, 2001). In its purest form, those who have social power can affect others, but others cannot affect the powerholder. Those with no power live at the whim of those with power and are unable to influence the powerful above them.

These conceptual definitions of power are incorporated into the social categories of 'powerful people' and 'powerless people.' According to the lay observer's expectations about these two social categories, being a powerful person is considered enviable. The powerful are assumed to live in a world of perfect freedom, in which they can choose their actions at whim and complete them unconstrained by other people or situations. Powerful actors are motivated by the things in their own heads and get to follow their internal desires rather than conform to outside circumstances. That is, nothing stands in the way of the powerful enacting their dispositions; and thus, if a powerful person behaves in a particular fashion, then it must reflect the nature and desires of the powerholder, rather than the circumstances surrounding the behavior.

Powerlessness, conversely, is seen by the lay observer as synonymous with the presence of constraint: the greater the constraint, the greater the powerlessness. A truly powerless person is seen as having no discretion in the selection of actions. The behavior of any actor labeled 'powerless,' then, must inevitably be a product of the situation, including whatever compulsion is exerted by more powerful others. In some criminal cases, for example, perpetrators are exonerated because of their powerlessness.

In this sense, power positions are very much like other social categories. People have expectations or beliefs about the experiences of the people who occupy them. We believe that these category-based expectations and beliefs (also known as stereotypes) guide the attributions made about people in these roles. Since people hold the stereotype that the powerful are unconstrained, they make dispositional attributions for power holders. Since they hold the stereotype that people in low power positions are constrained, they make situational attributions.

STEREOTYPES AND CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS

That people use social category information, and the stereotypes that accompany it, in explaining people's behavior has been well documented. For example, Sekaquaptewa and Espinoza (2004)

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suggested that dispositional attributions are made for people who conform to the stereotype of their group but situational attributions are made when people act in a stereotype-inconsistent manner. Similarly, Pettigrew (1979) argued that attributions for behavior of an outgroup member are likely to be situational when a (stereotype-inconsistent) positive behavior must be explained, and dispositional when a (stereotype-consistent) negative behavior must be explained. In relation to power, we suggest that the actual content of the stereotype of low power includes situationally-induced behavior, and that the content of the stereotype of high power includes dispositional behavior. Given that action is seen as consistent with the stereotype of powerful people (Keltner et al., 2003; Magee, 2004) and inconsistent with that of the powerless, it makes sense that any action should be seen dispositionally for the powerful and situationally for the powerless.

ACCURACY AND BIAS IN CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS ABOUT THE POWERFUL AND POWERLESS

In some situations, perceivers' stereotypes of constraint for powerful and powerless actors may result in attributions that accurately reflect reality. For example, there is evidence that people in high power positions act in accordance with their personalities more than people in low power positions (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001). Thus, attributing the behavior of high power people to their dispositions and the behavior of low power people to situations may in some cases be an accurate assessment. However, to the degree that a stereotype does not capture the reality of an individual target, there is ample opportunity for the resultant attribution to be incorrect. In the case of low and high power positions, we expect that there are many instances in which there is a gap between the stereotype and the particular individual. Despite the appearance of pure freedom and constraint, it is rare for managers and leaders to possess power in such an absolute way as to grant total control, and it is equally rare that subordinates are irrevocably constrained. People who occupy powerful roles are still frequently constrained, and those in powerless roles have some freedom and self-determination in at least some aspects of their behavior. If people perceive a perfect correlation between power and constraint, but if in fact it is an imperfect correlation, then it opens the possibility that people may be biased in their attributions. People may over-attribute dispositional causes to people in high power positions and over-attribute situational causes to the behavior of people in low power positions.

In two studies, we set out to test the following predictions: (1) that power should moderate the correspondence bias, such that more dispositional attributions are made for actions by high-power people and more situational attributions for actions by low-power people; and (2) that this effect itself can be further moderated by variables affecting the perceived amount of situational constraint present.

STUDY 1

In the first study we examined attributions made toward an actor who was working on a Saturday. The power of this actor was manipulated such that he was seen as an exemplar of a powerful or powerless social category. In addition, the *type* of power was manipulated, such that the powerholder in the hierarchy had either referent or coercive power (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965). *Referent* power is present when the powerholder compels compliance through charisma and attractiveness: the low-power target wishes to be like the powerholder, or to please the powerholder, and complies out of identification or internalization (Kelman, 1958). *Coercive* power, on the other hand, consists of the use

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of punishments and threats to enforce compliance, which may be publicly displayed, but not voluntary or internalized.

Our reason for including this factor is quite simple: the two forms of power convey different information about constraint. In the case of coercive power, actions by the powerholder impinge on the powerless person's freedom, and therefore it is in this condition that low-power actors' behavior is most likely to be attributed to the situation. Because referent power is internalized and experienced by the low-power person as more aligned with his own goals and volitions, it should not produce the perception of constraint and therefore there should be fewer differences between the attributions made about low and high power actors.

Method

Participants

Two hundred twelve undergraduates at the University of Southern California participated in the study. Participants were given course credit for their participation. The sample included 106 women, 105 men, and one participant not reporting gender.

Materials and Procedure

Participants completed the experiment via the Internet using an interactive website written in the Perl programming language. Participants were told to complete the study in one sitting, and to be sure they were in an environment free of distractions. Instructions on the computer screen informed participants that they would first be given a description of two people, and then asked questions about the people.

Following the instructions, participants were presented with a description of two employees in a fictitious corporation. The description included the two employees' job titles and brief summaries of their responsibilities. In treatment-condition descriptions, one employee was a manager (*high-power employee*) and the other was an assistant (*low-power employee*). In the control condition, the two were coworkers. The final part of the description stated that one of the two employees worked on Saturday.

Treatment participants were assigned to one of four conditions in which either a high- or low-power employee worked on Saturday, and in which the high-power employee derived power from either reference or coercion (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965). This manipulation was designed to introduce varying levels of constraint that should prompt different degrees of correspondence bias.

In the high-power referent condition, participants read,

> Paul Reed works at Wellington Inc. as the manager of the Human Resources department. Employees like and respect Paul and often work hard to avoid poor evaluations because they want to do their best to please him. In general, employees listen to Paul and follow his directions because they find him engaging and inspiring. They often try to do what Paul wants, even before he asks.
>
> Don Norman is a Human Resources Assistant who works under Paul. Paul is directly responsible for supervising his work. Don has worked under Paul for 3 years. He is currently responsible for assisting in the development of Human Resource policies.
>
> Last week, Paul worked on Saturday. He was finishing up a report on the status of the employee retention program. Paul was the only one in the office.

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The low-power referent condition only differed in the last paragraph, where participants read that the low-power employee, Don Norman, worked on Saturday. Note that the description did *not* state that Paul compelled Don to work. In the high-power coercion condition, participants read,

> Paul Reed works at Wellington Inc. as the manager of the Human Resources department. Paul has the ability to withhold bonuses, reprimand employees with a letter of warning, or fire employees if he finds that an employee is not living up to his standards. Not surprisingly, employees often claim that they only follow Paul's directions because they don't want get reprimanded or fired by him. Employees are aware that if they do not please Paul, their jobs are ultimately on the line.
>
> Don Norman is a Human Resources Assistant who works under Paul. Paul is directly responsible for supervising his work. Don has worked under Paul for 3 years. He is currently responsible for assisting in the development of Human Resource policies.
>
> Last week, Paul worked on Saturday. He was finishing up a report on the status of the employee retention program. Paul was the only one in the office.

Again, the low-power coercion condition differed only in the last paragraph, where participants read that the low-power employee, Don Norman, worked on Saturday.

Participants in the control condition saw a vignette that described two targets of equal power. We included this condition to establish a baseline for attributions, in order to determine whether high or low power might be more responsible for triggering the correspondence bias in perceivers. In the control condition, participants read,

> Paul Reed and Don Norman work at Wellington Inc., as Human Resources Assistants. They have both worked at Wellington Inc. for 3 years. Paul and Don are currently responsible for assisting in the development of Human Resource policies.
>
> Last week, Paul worked on Saturday. He was finishing up a report on the status of the employee retention program. Paul was the only one in the office.

After the participants finished reading the description of the employees, they completed a set of dependent measures.

Dependent Measures

Participants responded to two sets of measures. The first set of measures assessed situational and dispositional attributions made towards the employee who worked on Saturday and contained a total of eight items. Four assessed the degree to which participants made situational attributions. Participants were asked how much the relationship between the two employees influenced the decision to work on Saturday, the extent to which external pressures influenced the decision to work, the extent to which the situation constrained the choice to work, and the extent to which the situation made it necessary to work. Four additional measures assessed the degree to which participants made dispositional attributions. These included rating how much freedom the employee had in choosing to work, the extent to which the employee was free to make his own decisions, the extent to which the employee worked 'because of something about his personality,' and the extent to which the employee worked because of 'his own preferences or desires.' Participants rated these measures on a 7-point scale ($1 =$ 'Not at all' to $7 =$ 'A great deal'). The situational and dispositional measures were negatively correlated, $r(211) = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$.

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The second set of measures contained five manipulation checks to ensure that participants correctly encoded the power level and power-type information included in the description. Three questions assessed the degree to which participants believed the employees had power. Participants were asked to recall the extent to which the high-power employee had the ability to influence his subordinates, the extent to which the high-power employee had power, and the extent to which the low-power employee had power. Two questions assessed the participants' understanding of the type of power held by the high-power employee. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which the high-power employee's power was based on his ability to punish others (coercive power), and the extent to which the high-power employee's power was based on the respect that others have for him (referent power). Participants rated these measures on a 7-point scale (1 = 'Not at all' to 7 = 'A great deal').[1]

Results

Manipulation Checks

The following analyses do not include participants in the control condition. Participants first rated the extent to which the high-power employee had the ability to influence his subordinates. Ratings of the high-power employee's ability to influence his subordinates were significantly higher than the mid-point power value of 4, $M = 5.98$, $t(166) = 21.85$, $p < 0.001$. Participants next rated the extent to which the high-power employee had power. Again, their rating of the high-power employee's power was significantly higher than the mid-point value of 4, $M = 6.07$, $t(166) = 22.54$, $p < 0.001$. Further, participants rated high-power targets as more powerful than low-power targets, $t(166) = 18.53$, $p < 0.001$ (means are displayed in Table 1).

We asked two questions about perceived influence tactics: the extent to which the high-power employee's power was based on his ability to punish others, and the extent to which the high-power employee's power was based on the respect that others have for him, an indicator of referent power. These measures were analyzed using a 2 (target power: high vs. low) × 2 (high-power employee's power type: referent vs. coercive) × 2 (perceived influence tactic: punishment vs. respect) analysis of variance with repeated measures on the third factor.

Table 1. Mean scores on manipulation checks and dispositional and situational scales as a function of target power and power type

Variable	High/Referent	High/Coercive	Low/Referent	Low/Coercive	Control
HPE 's ability to influence	$5.79_{a,b}$ (1.17)	6.11_{a} (1.2)	$5.74_{a,c}$ (1.12)	$6.26_{b,c}$ (1.11)	
Extent of HPE's power	$5.89_{a,b}$ (1.22)	6.02_{a} (1.42)	$6.00_{a,b}$ (1.10)	6.40_{b} (0.79)	
Extent of LPE's power	3.91_{a} (1.26)	3.55_{a} (1.32)	3.97_{a} (1.25)	3.89_{a} (1.33)	
HPE's power based on punish	3.94_{a} (1.65)	6.45_{b} (0.82)	4.23_{a} (1.48)	6.53_{c} (0.86)	
HPE's power based on respect	5.96_{a} (1.24)	3.36_{b} (1.70)	5.71_{a} (1.30)	3.61_{b} (1.65)	
Dispositional attributions	5.34_{a} (1.05)	$5.10_{a,b}$ (1.23)	5.17_{a} (0.85)	3.88_{b} (1.16)	4.98_{a} (1.30)
Situational attributions	3.80_{a} (0.99)	3.66_{a} (0.98)	4.59_{b} (0.88)	5.20_{c} (1.07)	$4.01_{a,b}$ (1.08)
Difference (Disp−Sit)	1.55 (1.62)	1.43 (1.95)	0.58 (1.29)	−1.32 (1.90)	0.98 (1.85)

Note: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. In each row, means with different subscripts differ at $p < 0.05$.

[1]For ease of administration, participants in both treatment and control conditions completed these measures. For the latter group, though, the measures had no meaning, since neither employee was more powerful. Though this was probably a strange set of questions for these participants, it was administered last, was not analyzed, and should have no effect on their responses.

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An interaction between power type and influence tactic indicated that participants distinguished the type of influence used by high-power targets based on the target's power type, $F(1, 207) = 223.20$, $p < 0.001$. Tests of the simple effects of perceived influence tactics within the levels of power type show that participants correctly identified punishment as the influence tactic used in the coercive condition, $M_{\text{Pun}} = 6.49$ versus $M_{\text{Resp}} = 3.48$, $F(1, 207) = 184.14$, $p < 0.001$, and respect as the tactic used in the referent condition, $M_{\text{Pun}} = 4.05$ versus $M_{\text{Resp}} = 5.87$, $F(1, 207) = 79.57$, $p < 0.001$.

Testing Predictions

Both the situational ($\alpha = 0.62$) and dispositional ($\alpha = 0.81$) scales exhibited acceptable reliability. Data were analyzed using a 2 (target power: high vs. low) $\times$ 2 (high-power employee's power type: referent vs. coercion) + 1 (control) $\times$ 2 (attribution type: situational vs. dispositional) analysis of variance with repeated measures on the attribution factor. The primary prediction was that the degree to which participants made situational versus dispositional attributions would depend on power (an interaction of target power and attribution type). After establishing that, we hoped to show that the 3-way interaction with power type was also significant, such that the primary effect was stronger in the coercive than the referent power condition. First we will report results from the $2 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance, and then report results from contrasts that include the control condition.

Indeed, as predicted, attributions for weekend work depended on whether the worker was of high- or low-power, $F(1, 206) = 44.76$, $p < 0.001$. More dispositional attributions were made when the target was high-power than low-power, $M_{\text{HP}} = 5.23$ versus $M_{\text{LP}} = 4.46$, $F(1, 206) = 14.90$, $p < 0.001$, and more situational attributions were made when the target was low-power than high-power, $M_{\text{HP}} = 3.74$ versus $M_{\text{LP}} = 4.92$, $F(1, 206) = 53.00$, $p < 0.001$. These results support our central argument. High-power targets were perceived as more free to act and thus their behavior was attributed to dispositional features, whereas low-power targets, perceived as constrained in their actions, had behavior attributed to situational features.

Our second prediction was also supported: the above effect was stronger in the coercive power condition than in the referent, $F(1, 206) = 10.30$, $p < 0.002$; this effect was primarily driven by judgments of the *low*-power target. Power type did not influence dispositional, $F(1, 206) = 0.41$, *n.s.*, or situational, $F(1, 206) = 1.12$, *n.s.*, attributions for high-power targets (for means, see Table 1). Power type did, however, influence attributions for low-power targets: Situational attributions were more common under coercive than referent power, $F(1, 206) = 6.25$, $p < 0.02$. On the other hand, dispositional attributions were more common under referent than coercive power, $F(1, 206) = 21.90$, $p < 0.001$.[2]

We also compared the manipulated conditions to the control condition, to explore the direction of the effects. Collapsing across power type, we examined whether situational and dispositional attributions made toward high power targets differed from those made toward controls. They did not, $F(1, 206) = 2.66$, *n.s.*, although the means (see Table 1) were in the expected direction and were quite

[2]A number of other effects were also significant. Replicating previous research on the correspondence bias, we found a main effect of attribution type, $M_{\text{Disp}} = 4.93$ versus $M_{\text{Sit}} = 4.18$, $F(1, 206) = 27.46$, $p < 0.001$. A two-way interaction between power type and attribution type indicated that attributions differed based on the type of power, $F(1, 206) = 13.18$, $p < 0.001$, such that more dispositional attributions were made when reference was present, and more situational attributions when coercion was present. Two other effects, not central to our predictions, were also found. A main effect of target power indicated that participants in the low-power condition made stronger attributions overall than participants in the high-power condition, $M_{\text{LP}} = 6.64$ versus $M_{\text{HP}} = 6.34$, $F(1, 206) = 5.48$, $p < 0.05$. Furthermore, a main effect of high power employee's power type indicated that participants in the referent condition made stronger attributions overall than participants in the coercion condition, $M_{\text{Ref}} = 6.62$ 6.62 versus $M_{\text{Coer}} = 6.97$, $F(1, 206) = 18.15$, $p < 0.01$. We do not find that these results support or detract from our findings.

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high, indicating that attributions made toward high-power targets were, indeed, strongly dispositional. On the other hand, situational and dispositional attributions made toward low-power targets did differ from those made toward the control, $F(1, 206) = 16.24$, $p < 0.01$. Low power targets were judged more situationally motivated than controls, $F(1, 206) = 21.34$, $p < 0.01$, and less dispositionally motivated than controls, $F(1, 206) = 4.49$, $p < 0.04$. As suggested by the three-way interaction above, these differences between the low-power and control conditions were driven by the low-power coercive condition. Only the low-power coercive condition differed from control on situational, $F(1, 206) = 28.94$, $p < 0.001$, and dispositional, $F(1, 206) = 19.54$, $p < 0.001$, attributions (for means, see Table 1).

Discussion

Study 1 confirms that the actions of powerless actors are seen to be situational (i.e., a consequence of constraints upon the actor) and those of powerful actors are seen to be somewhat more dispositional (i.e., resulting from the actor's own preferences given the lack of constraint). In a hierarchy characterized by referent power—that is, when power seems less constraining—then both powerless and powerful actors are seen as dispositionally motivated. The results of this study support our assertion that perceptions of constraint—informed by both the power role and power type of the actor—are likely to affect causal attributions made about powerful and powerless actors.

In designing Study 2, we sought to eliminate a number of potential alternative explanations for our results. First, although it appears that our results are driven primarily by perceptions of the powerless, dispositional attributions are the most common baseline response (e.g., Jones & Harris, 1967; Jones & Nisbett, 1971). The threshold that must be exceeded in order to find that perceptions of the powerful are *particularly* dispositional is quite high already. Further, in our control condition, the two targets share the same position and situational constraints. As Kelley (1967) would predict, when information about two targets is constant, and one behaves in a distinct way from the other (works on Saturday), it is likely that a dispositional attribution will be made about the distinct target. It should also be noted that somewhat more detail is provided about the high-power employee, and this too can lead to a more dispositional attribution. That is, we may have fostered dispositional attributions in the control condition. To counter the possibility that our results were due simply to accuracy, and not to bias, our second study was designed to demonstrate biased perception of the powerful by comparing the effects of diagnostic constraint information with constraint information implied by power role stereotypes. The design also eliminates the asymmetry in richness of information provided about the two targets.

Another goal of Study 2 was to assess whether people use power in a biased fashion in determining causality. In some cases, cause is objectively clear; in other cases, it isn't. We expect that people use power in those cases where the cause is not objectively clear. In some cases where there isn't clear information, power may be the best possible cue, and so using it as a source of information would be a reasonable strategy. However, there are ambiguous cases where there is better information available than power, and if people use power in that context, they are using power cues in a biased fashion. In the second study, we attempted to create all three of these kinds of conditions: situations in which there was quite clear information about causality; situations that were ambiguous, and in which power was the best cue; and situations that were ambiguous but in which power was not the best cue. We expected that, when there was a clear cause, people would make the appropriate attribution reflecting that clear cause; but in ambiguous situations, even if power were not the most diagnostic cue, power would tend to be used as a basis for causal attribution.

In addition, because our participants were university undergraduates, it is possible that their personal experience made it easier for them to relate to an assistant than to a boss. And, just as people make more

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situational attributions for themselves than for others (the 'actor-observer difference,' Storms, 1973), so they might too make situational attributions for a person to whom they are more similar. In Study 2, power distance between two targets was held constant. Attributions were made for the actions of a *Professor*, and we manipulated the professor's power position by changing the status of the person who asked him to act.

Finally, in this study, we elected to replicate one of the classic correspondence bias studies as nearly as possible, but added information about actors' power. Study 2 closely followed the procedure used by Quattrone (1982). Quattrone reasoned that dispositional attributions are made because the perceptual salience of a behavior (typically an opinion essay) overwhelms the knowledge that the writer had no choice in the behavior. Dispositional attributions should decrease when situational constraints are more salient. Quattrone presented participants with a scenario in which a person wrote an essay at the request of another individual. Further, participants learned that the essay was either consistent or inconsistent with the writer's own opinion. Quattrone demonstrated that when the essay was inconsistent with the author's pre-existing attitude, people made situational attributions. Specifically, they believed that the essay author was simply trying to please the person who had asked for the essay. That is, the asker functioned as a constraint.

Similarly, participants in our study read an attitude essay that was either congruent or incongruent with the essay author's (the professor's) pre-established opinion. In addition, we provided information about the power of the professor relative to the person who asked that the essay be written, and information about the asker's attitude. These variables provided information about two forms of constraint: constraint produced by power roles, and (more relevant) constraint produced by knowledge of what the asker wanted the essay to say.

Our primary prediction for this study was, again, that causal attributions would depend on the power of the actor. Yet, we also thought power should have a differential impact depending on the condition. When the asker and the professor's pre-existing attitudes are different, it should be easy to determine the cause of the professor's essay. If the essay is consistent with his pre-existing attitude, his essay clearly reflects his disposition. If it is inconsistent, then the professor must have felt constrained by the asker, and thus a situational attribution is logical. However, if the asker and professor's pre-existing attitudes are the same then there is attributional ambiguity. The professor's essay might reflect his true belief (i.e., disposition) or might reflect pressure he feels from the asker (i.e., situational constraint). This is the context in which people's biases about the constraining capacity of power and powerlessness can emerge. In this case, we predict that power will be seen as a more informative cause of behavior.

STUDY 2

Method

Participants

One hundred forty-nine undergraduates at Stanford University participated in the study. Participants were paid $5 for their participation. One participant did not complete the DVs and was removed from the analysis. The remaining sample included 88 women and 60 men.

Materials and Procedure

This study closely followed Quattrone's (1982) procedure. Participants came to the lab in groups of two to four and worked individually at semi-private computer workstations. The materials for the study

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were presented using Media Lab (Empirisoft) on Windows-based computers. Instructions on the computer screen described the purpose of this study as investigating 'the psychology of bias.'

Following the cover story, participants were instructed to read about a recently completed evaluation of campus attitudes at a major west-coast university. Participants were assigned to either a high- or low-power condition, reflecting the power role of the focal target (i.e., the professor) *vis à vis* the other character in the story. In the low-power condition, participants read,

> Your role in this experiment is to read about a recently completed evaluation of campus attitudes at the University of California. As part of an annual review, a dean surveyed faculty opinions on the legalization of marijuana. This dean asked this professor to write a statement on his opinion of whether or not marijuana should be legalized.

The dean represents the asker, and thus the professor is in a low-power role. In the high-power condition, participants read,

> Your role in this experiment is to read about a recently completed evaluation of campus attitudes at the University of California. As part of a class assignment, a student surveyed faculty opinions on the legalization of marijuana. This student asked this professor to write a statement on his opinion of whether or not marijuana should be legalized.

Here, the student represents the asker, and thus the professor is in a high-power role.

Participants were then instructed that they would 'later be asked about [their] impressions of the situation confronting the people in this case.' Following the initial instructions page, participants read descriptions about the two characters. Participants were always first presented with information about the asker (i.e., the Student or Dean). Brief biographical information was presented, which included name, position, and years at the university for the Dean, and name, major, and year for the student. Descriptions also included four scale items—one that assessed the asker's opinion on the legalization of marijuana ('All things considered, the sale and use of marijuana should be legalized'), and three filler items. The askers' responses to these filler items were identical across conditions, and represented moderate stances that should not suggest a particular political orientation.

The only opinion item that varied by condition was the first item, which indicated the target's opinion of legalizing marijuana. Responses to the scale items were given on a 7-point scale ($-3 =$ 'Strongly Agree' to $3 =$ 'Strongly Disagree'). Depending on condition, participants were informed that the Student or Dean either 'Strongly Disagreed' (3) with the legalization of marijuana, or had 'No Opinion' (0) about the legalization of marijuana. Participants were presented with similar descriptions of the professor. Identical scale items were used, with only the first item alternating depending on condition. The professor either 'Strongly Disagreed' (3) with the legalization of marijuana, or had 'No Opinion' (0).

Following the descriptions of the targets, participants were instructed to read both the letter that the Student/Dean (the 'asker') wrote to the professor and the professor's essay in response to this letter. Following Quattrone (1982) participants were asked to try to imagine that they were the professor and that they were trying to comply with the asker's request. Participants then read the request letter, which contained approximately 200 words and was displayed for at least 120 seconds. This letter, written by the asker, included information relevant to the request and contained embedded information about the asker's opinion regarding the legalization of marijuana.

The manipulation of these two opinions provided information about constraint on the professor and provided cues for making attributions. In all cases, the professor's essay was anti-legalization. As stated earlier, there would be little attributional ambiguity if asker and professor disagreed: either the asker's opinion prevailed, consistent with a situational explanation, or the professor's prevailed, consistent with a dispositional explanation. However, if the two agreed, then it is not clear which was the primary

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cause of the professor's behavior. The professor's own view represents a potential dispositional cause, whereas the asker's view represents a situational constraint in the form of possible pressure toward conformity.

Next, participants read the professor's response, which was written on university letterhead, contained approximately 250 words, and was displayed for at least 180 seconds. The content of the professor's response essay was identical in all conditions, opposing the legalization of marijuana.[3] Again, we expected that the effects of this information on participants' subsequent attributions would depend on the relative power that the professor is seen to possess. After the participants finished reading the professor's response, they completed a set of dependent measures.

Dependent Measures

The measures used here replicate many of those used by Quattrone (1982). In general, we were interested in knowing whether the relative *power* of a target (here, a professor) leads perceivers to engage more or less in the correspondence bias. To this end, we evaluated participants' perceptions of situational forces and professors' responses through three kinds of measures: the degree to which high-power and low-power professors were *subject to external pressures* to write a particular opinion; the degree to which they were seen to be *free to express their true opinion* in the essay; and the extent to which their behavior was seen as *situationally or dispositionally motivated*.

Two items assessed *external pressures* on the professor: Participants were asked to infer the direction and extremity of the asker's *subtle* cues to influence the professor to write an essay in one particular direction (Quattrone, 1982), and to infer the direction and extremity of the asker's *overt* cues. Participants rated these measures on a 7-point scale ($-3 =$ 'pressure towards opposing legalization' to $3 =$ 'pressure towards favoring legalization'). These two items exhibited strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$) and were combined to create an overall impression of the external pressures faced by the professor.

The amount of *freedom* the professor had in choosing a position was also rated on a 7-point scale ($-3 =$ 'Not at all' to $3 =$ 'Very Much').

Four additional questions assessed the *situational versus dispositional* nature of the attributions. Participants were asked to rate situational factors, including how much the professor was trying to please the asker in writing the essay, how much the professor was trying to avoid offending the asker, and how much the professor was trying to avoid revealing his true opinion. Participants also rated how much the professor's own disposition affected his essay—specifically, how much the professor was trying to express his true opinion. Participants rated these measures on a 7-point scale ($-3 =$ 'Not at all' to $3 =$ 'Very Much'). Three of the four questions were designed to assess situational attributions and were highly correlated. These dependent variables were combined into one variable ($\alpha = 0.74$) measuring the extent to which participants made situational attributions. The fourth variable was negatively correlated with the situational scale variable, $r(146) = -0.56$, $p < 0.001$, and was used to measure dispositional attributions.

[3]Quattrone's original design, though it manipulated three levels of writer's prior opinion (pro vs. no opinion vs. anti) and two levels of essay position (pro vs. anti), was also incomplete: Quattrone used only four conditions: no (prior) opinion–pro (essay), pro–pro, no opinion–anti, and anti–anti. Given our desire to add an additional predictor, asker opinion, to keep the design from growing too large we elected to retain Quattrone's no (prior) opinion–anti (essay) and anti–anti conditions, crossing them with asker's no- and anti-prior opinion. This design means that we cannot ask certain questions, such as the effects of a no-opinion essay. Also, including a 'pro' condition here may have allowed us to see even more extreme attributional patterns. Our four conditions do, however, provide for comparisons between low and high situational constraints.

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As manipulation checks, participants were asked to recall the attitude that the professor expressed in his essay and to assess the 'true attitude' of the asker and of the professor. Participants rated these measures on a 7-point scale ($-3 =$ 'Oppose Legalization' to $3 =$ 'Favor Legalization'). Finally, participants were asked to rate their own beliefs about the legalization of marijuana. Participants responded using a 7-point scale ($-3 =$ 'Oppose Legalization' to $3 =$ 'Favor Legalization').

Our primary prediction for this study was, again, a 2-way interaction between power and attribution type, such that more dispositional attributions would be made for high-power professors and more situational attributions for low-power professors. We also predicted that the power-by-attribution type interaction would be further moderated by agreement between the asker and the professor, because only under conditions of attributional ambiguity (i.e., when the parties agree) should power become a source of biased attribution. This prediction translates to a hypothesized 4-way interaction of power, attribution type, asker opinion, and professor opinion.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

We checked participants' perceptions of the essay, the asker's opinion, and the professor's pre-existing opinion. Participants correctly understood the written statement to oppose legalization—that is, ratings of the attitude expressed in the essay were not significantly different from the most extreme 'oppose' value of -3, $M = -1.92$, $t(141) = 1.59$, *n.s.* Participants correctly distinguished asker opinions in the two relevant conditions, $M_{\text{anti}} = -2.33$ versus $M_{\text{no opinion}} = 0.00$, $F(1, 141) = 159.26$, $p < 0.001$. They also correctly distinguished the two professor's pre-existing opinion conditions. A professor who was characterized as opposing legalization in his biographical description was perceived as more opposed than was a professor characterized as having no opinion, $M_{\text{anti}} = -2.44$ versus $M_{\text{no opinion}} = -1.03$, $F(1, 141) = 46.79$, $p < 0.001$. No other effects were found for manipulation check variables.

The data were analyzed using a 2 (professor power: high vs. low) $\times$ 2 (asker's rated opinion: anti-legalization vs. no opinion) $\times$ 2 (professor's rated opinion: anti-legalization versus no opinion) analysis of covariance controlling for the participant's own opinion about legalization[4] (see Quattrone, 1982). With the exception of *external pressure*, we have transformed all scales to a 1 to 7 range for ease of reporting.

Power and Attributions

Means for the following analyses are displayed in Table 2. The central prediction, of an interaction between power and attribution type indicating that attributions differed when a professor was asked to write an opinion statement by a Student versus a Dean, was confirmed, $F(1, 139) = 12.96$, $p < 0.001$. This finding replicates the central effect of Study 1 and provides additional support for our argument that power affects attribution patterns. As in Study 1, more dispositional attributions were made when the professor was powerful rather than powerless, $M_{\text{HP}} = 4.83$ versus $M_{\text{LP}} = 4.24$, $F(1, 139) = 5.71$, $p < 0.02$, and more situational attributions were made when the professor was powerless than powerful, $M_{\text{HP}} = 2.98$ versus $M_{\text{LP}} = 3.79$, $F(1, 139) = 15.05$, $p < 0.001$.

[4]In all analyses, we controlled for the participant's own opinion on the legalization of marijuana. A marginal interaction between participant's belief and attribution type indicated that greater situational attributions were made by participants who were more opposed to the legalization of marijuana, $F(1, 139) = 5.11$, $p < 0.06$.

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Table 2. Mean scores on dependent variables by condition (asker Opinion/professor Opinion)

Variable	NoOp/Anti	NoOp/NoOp	Anti/Anti	Anti/NoOp
High Power				
Asker subtle and overt cues	3.88_{a} (0.72)	4.08_{a} (0.38)	2.50_{b} (1.15)	2.86_{b} (1.41)
Freedom	5.70_{a} (1.95)	$4.47_{a,b}$ (2.08)	$5.39_{a,b}$ (1.50)	4.43_{b} (1.66)
Dispositional attributions	5.25_{a} (1.86)	$4.79_{a,b}$ (1.78)	5.67_{a} (1.50)	3.76_{b} (1.55)
Situational attributions	$2.62_{a,b}$ (1.09)	$3.37_{a,c}$ (1.01)	2.22_{b} (0.89)	3.62_{c} (1.55)
Low Power				
Asker subtle and overt cues	4.03_{a} (0.98)	3.66_{a} (0.81)	2.13_{b} (0.74)	2.12_{b} (1.32)
Freedom	5.22_{a} (1.70)	$3.94_{a,b}$ (1.53)	3.00_{b} (1.41)	3.71_{b} (1.59)
Dispositional attributions	5.61_{a} (1.14)	$3.50_{b,c}$ (1.63)	$4.60_{a,c}$ (1.45)	3.38_{b} (1.69)
Situational attributions	2.65_{a} (1.21)	3.81_{b} (1.49)	3.91_{b} (1.13)	4.67_{b} (1.58)
Dispositional attributions				

Note: In each row, means with different subscripts differ at $p < 0.05$. Standard deviations are shown in parentheses.

Again, we predicted that this 2-way interaction, which represents the central question of interest in this work, would be further moderated by the amount of agreement between asker and professor. This is equivalent to predicting a 4-way interaction between power, attribution type, asker opinion, and professor's opinion. Indeed, this interaction was significant, $F(1, 139) = 5.11$, $p < 0.03$. To examine this result more clearly, we used a linear contrast analysis to ask whether the magnitude of the power × attribution type interaction might vary according to the situational constraint information. This analysis showed that power did not make a difference in attribution type when there was little attributional ambiguity and the role of disposition seemed clearest (when asker had no opinion and professor was anti); that power had a moderate effect on attribution type when the professor had no opinion (particularly when the parties agreed, so attributional ambiguity was present); and that power led to the biggest difference in attribution types when asker and professor agreed on an anti-legalization stance, thus introducing the maximum attributional ambiguity; linear contrast $F(1, 139) = 6.55$, $p = 0.011$. The pattern of means is depicted in Figure 1.

Perceived Constraint

Finally, our arguments rely on the difference in perceived constraint associated with different levels of power. We analyzed a number of other measures to confirm this difference. First, participants perceived the power role as a source of information about constraint. The powerless professor was seen as subject to more *external pressure* to oppose legalization[5] than the powerful professor, $M_{HP} = 0.33$ versus $M_{LP} = -0.04$, $F(1, 139) = 4.16$, $p < 0.05$ and as having less *freedom to choose a position*, $M_{HP} = 5.05$ versus $M_{LP} = 4.00$, $F(1, 139) = 14.75$, $p < 0.001$. Second, participants perceived the asker's opinion as a source of constraint on the professor. The anti-legalization asker was associated with more *external pressure* to oppose legalization, $M_{anti} = -1.58$ versus $M_{no\ opinion} = -0.08$, $F(1, 141) = 80.28$, $p < 0.001$, and with less *freedom to choose a position*, $M_{anti} = 4.17$ versus $M_{no\ opinion} = 4.95$,

[5]Because the verbal labels of the response scale for this measure contained both direction and extremity information, we analyzed for the two kinds of effects separately. The body of the paper reports on direction (pro vs. anti) effects. We also used the absolute value of this pressure index to measure the extremity of external pressures exerted, regardless of direction. Only one effect was found: a main effect of asker opinion. This effect indicated that an asker who opposed legalization was perceived as exerting more pressure, in either direction, than one who had no opinion, $M_{anti} = 1.23$ versus $M_{no\ opinion} = 0.94$, $F(1, 141) = 7.84$, $p < 0.01$. This finding is to be expected given that all opinion statements were written in opposition to legalization and were thus congruent with the asker's initial opinion.

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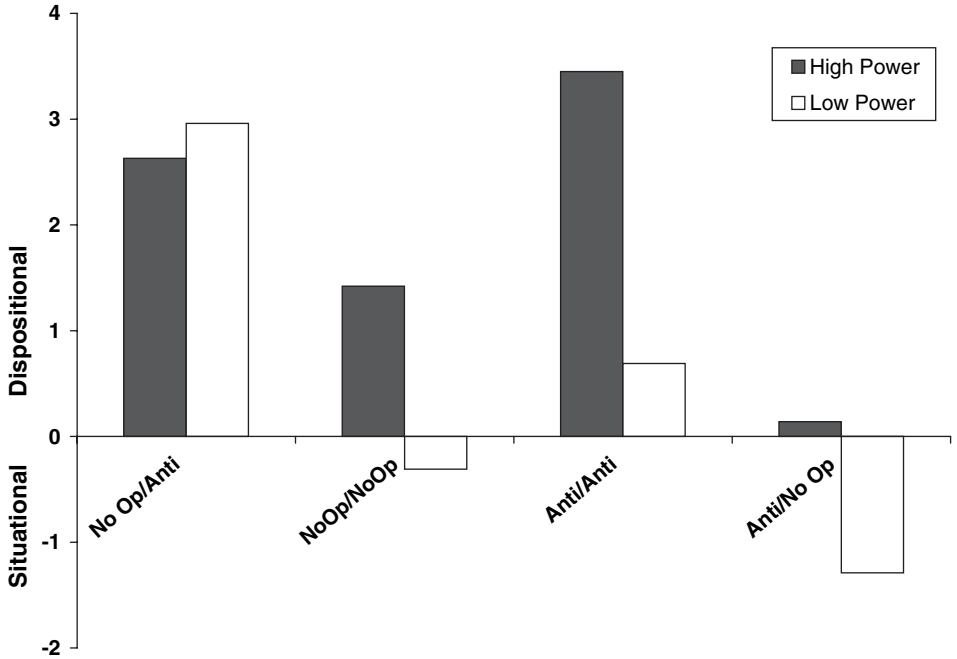

Figure 1. Four-way interaction of professor power, asker opinion (listed first on X axis), professor opinion (listed second on X axis), and attribution type, Study 2. For simplicity, bars represent a difference score of Dispositional−Situational attributions. Positive numbers indicate more dispositional than situational attributions, negative numbers the reverse. Scales ranged from 1 to 7

$F(1, 139) = 7.51$, $p < 0.007$. Finally, participants perceived the professor as having less *freedom to choose a position* when the professor was characterized as having no opinion on the legalization of marijuana (but, of course, wrote against legalization), $M_{\text{anti}} = 4.93$ versus $M_{\text{no opinion}} = 4.21$, $F(1, 139) = 4.97$, $p < 0.03$.[6]

These results support the notion that power role provides one important piece of information about constraint, and that perceivers are sensitive both to this and to other situational constraint information. However, in this study, the most diagnostic constraint information is certainly the pre-existing opinions, since they are most clearly related to the behavior (the essay) being judged. In these results, not only do we see evidence of appropriate and accurate use of power role information, but also evidence of bias in allowing the power role to crowd out the more useful information about constraints. That is, when the pre-existing opinions of asker and professor are the same, the perceiver faces ambiguity in the potential causes of behavior. This ambiguity tends to be resolved in the direction of the power role information.

This ambiguity, which colors the perceiver's view of situational constraint, exacerbates the tendency to make attributions based on the power of an actor. That is, low power tends to facilitate situational attributions, whereas high power tends to lead to dispositional attributions, and this is particularly true in situations in which the role of situational constraint is ambiguous. On the one hand, this is not terribly

[6]Analysis revealed two additional effects of little theoretical importance. A significant interaction between asker opinion and attribution type indicated that attributions differed as a function of the asker's opposition to, or lack of opinion toward, the legalization of marijuana, $F(1, 139) = 4.97$, $p < 0.05$. An interaction between the professor's opinion and attribution type, $F(1, 139) = 36.36$, $p < 0.01$, showed that more dispositional attributions were made when the professor was opposed to legalization than when he had no opinion, and more situational attributions were made when the professor had no opinion than when he was opposed.

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surprising, echoing so cleanly the basic tenets of attribution theory (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Harris, 1967; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Quattrone, 1982; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977). On the other hand, we must note the important contribution that these studies offer to the literature on power. The mere fact that it seems obvious that powerholders will be seen as dispositionally motivated and those in powerless roles as situationally bound is evidence of our chronic associations. These studies demonstrate that these associations persevere, and determine our judgments, even when contradictory, but more diagnostic, information is available. Notably, when someone in a powerless role is clearly not being subject to any sort of coercion, perceivers nonetheless see that role as a primary cause of behavior. When perceivers have information about both freedom and constraint, they appear to see the powerful in terms of freedom, and the powerless in terms of constraint.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The pattern of findings lends support to the idea that perceivers are both correctly responding to differences in the amount of freedom that powerful and powerless actors enjoy, and engaging in some biased perception by overestimating constraints on the powerless and underestimating constraints on the powerful.

Why Might Target Power Moderate Perceiver Bias?

Assumptions about Constraint

Most central to our argument is the idea that, on average, perceivers interpret power as lack of constraint. Therefore, when presented with a target who is 'powerful' as operationalized as position or authority, perceivers will typically assume that the target is more able to act dispositionally. Likewise, if a target is presented as 'powerless,' then she or he will be seen as highly constrained, and more situational attributions will be made.

In the studies presented here, we have manipulated power role, and shown that in doing so, we also have manipulated perceived constraint. Further, when we manipulated perceived constraint independently from power role, results confirm that both factors affect attributions in the expected ways. However, importantly, our participants were not very good at identifying which kind of constraint information was more diagnostic. That is, when the cause of behavior was unclear, participants used power as a basis for attribution even when it was not the most diagnostic information available. It is likely that this represents a cognitive shortcut (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) that helps to simplify the perceiver's social world and relieve him or her of the need to form complex, evidence-based attributions for each new action.

Power as Social Category Information

Our findings echo work on biased perception as a function of social categorization. A longstanding literature on stereotyping and intergroup perception bears out the tendency for perceivers to make different attributions, or use different attributional processes, based on group membership (Pettigrew, 1979; Sekaquaptewa, Espinoza, Thompson, Vargas, & von Hippel, 2003;

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Sekaquaptewa & Espinoza, 2004). For example, Sekaquaptewa and Espinoza (2004) showed that perceivers feel more compelled to explain behavior in situational terms if it seems inconsistent with stereotypes and was performed by members of a low-status group. In a similar vein, Pettigrew (1979) noted that some prior research has found that low- and high-status group members tend to make similar dispositional attributions for the positive actions of high-status groups. This suggests that groups defined by power or status may be subject to a shared stereotype that guides attributions about group members' actions. It should be noted, of course, that Guinote and colleagues (Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, 2002) found that shared stereotypes about high-power groups may in fact be quite accurate; both low- and high-power groups rated high-power groups as more varied and internally motivated, and observers unaware of the groups' power status agreed. Again, the findings we have discussed can reflect accurate attributions for behavior *as well as* bias.

Motives Chronically Associated with Power

Some analyses of the attribution process hold that perceivers do not merely sort actions into either 'person' or 'situation' bins. Reeder and colleagues (Reeder, Vonk, Ronk, Ham, & Lawrence, 2004), for example, speculate that perceived pre-existing *motives* for a given behavior may be even more important than the behavior itself for producing an attribution. In the domain of power, it is likely that perceivers tend to expect particular motives of the powerful; some common expectations might include self-interest, paternalism, or the desire to exploit others. If being powerful (or powerless) is chronically associated with particular motives, then an observed behavior will be interpreted in terms of those motives, rather than solely in terms of either the situation or the individual disposition. Powerful actors may be seen as acting more dispositionally if the associated motives, such as those mentioned above, are typically more dispositional; powerless actors may be seen as more influenced by the situation because motives associated with powerlessness probably involve compliance and reacting to external forces. Future research on association of particular chronic motives with power would be fruitful in elaborating this possibility.

Accessibility of the Perspectives of the Powerless

To some extent, being powerless may be a more broadly shared, socially consensual experience than power (cf. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In any organizational setting, the number of powerholders will be dwarfed by the number of those who are less powerful (cf. Fiske, 1993), and therefore the base rate for experiencing powerlessness should be much greater than that for experiencing power. Further, power tends to be treated as a 'dirty word,' a phenomenon rarely mentioned or acknowledged (Conniff, 2002; Pfeffer, 1992). Often, those who have it seek ways to disguise, avoid, or outright deny that they possess it (Conniff, 2002). For all of these reasons, experiences of power are unlikely to be salient or widely shared among perceivers. It may be then that the constraints on the powerless are chronically accessible to most perceivers, whereas those on the powerful are not. The accessibility of the perspectives of the powerless should lead to a greater consideration of situational forces on these actors.

Final Thoughts

In multiple contexts—corporate misconduct, military abuses, government failures—we believe there to be a common tendency for observers to seek more situational causes for the actions of less-powerful

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actors, whereas the same actions committed by powerholders are seen as more dispositional. Determining causes has important implications for how responsibility and blame are assigned. Attributing dispositional evil to more powerful actors may result in their being punished harshly. More situational attributions for the actions of less-powerful actors may help them to avoid tough sanctions, and may prompt a revisitation of the structures that gave rise to the abuse.

In light of this, it seems important that we be cautious in attributing innate badness to powerholders. Although such attribution may lead us quite appropriately to hold them responsible and levy penalties, it may also cause us to miss the important situational factors that facilitate powerholders' bad behavior (also see Miller, Gordon, & Buddie, 1999). More important, it may cause us to miss evidence that certain toxic situations may constrain the powerful as well as the powerless—and thus to fail to act to fix those situations. The force of the situation is often emphasized in social psychology; we must not discount this force when observing the powerful.

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