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Illegitimacy Improves Goal Pursuit in Powerless Individuals

Guillermo B. Willis

Universidad de Granada (Spain)

Ana Guinote

University College of London (UK)

Rosa Rodríguez-Bailón

Universidad de Granada (Spain)

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Address correspondence to: Guillermo B. Willis, Departamento de Psicología Social y Metodología de las Ciencias del Comportamiento, Campus de Cartuja s/n, Facultad de Psicología, 18011 Granada, phone: +34-958-240690, email: gwillis@ugr.es.

Abstract

The effects of power legitimacy on self-regulation during goal pursuit were examined. Study 1 focused on goal-setting and goal-striving. Specifically, it examined how much time legitimate and illegitimate powerless individuals needed to set goals, and how many means they generated to pursue these goals. Study 2 examined persistence in the face of difficulties. Consistently across these studies illegitimacy improved self-regulation in powerless individuals. Illegitimate powerless individuals behaved similarly as control participants. They took less time to decide on a course of action, used more flexible means to strive for goals, and persisted longer in the face of difficulties, compared to their legitimate counterparts. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Power, Legitimacy, Goal Pursuit, Persistency.

Power - the ability to influence others (Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005), and to control others' outcomes (Fiske, 1993) – is a pervasive feature of social structures. In today's society power emerges to facilitate problem solving and group decision making (van Vugt, 2006). Power hierarchies are necessary and consented by society at large because they serve collective goals. Consequently, power positions tend to be occupied by merit, competence or social agreement (Boehm & Flack, in press; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). Under such conditions, power is perceived as deserved - i.e., power is legitimate (Tajfel, 1981).

Although power is often legitimized, this is not always the case. Some power hierarchies are perceived as unfair and inadequate (i.e., are illegitimate, see Tyler, 2006). Illegitimate power relations are socially undesirable, and are subject to opposition. In this sense, illegitimate power may be less stable than legitimate power (Spears, Greenwood, de Lemus, & Sweetman, in press; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the present article we examine the effects of power legitimacy on the self-regulatory processes of powerless individuals.

Powerless individuals have more constraints, live in difficult environments (Keltner et al., 2003), and have largely unmet needs (Henry & Pratto, in press). As a consequence, a powerless position strongly and consistently impairs performance in a variety of cognitive and goal directed tasks. Powerless individuals are more inhibited (Keltner et al., 2003), are distracted by peripheral cues, and are less able to focus attention on their focal goals (Guinote, 2007a; see also Smith, Jostman, Galinsky, & van Dijk, 2008). Compared to powerful individuals, those without power distinguish less between goal relevant and irrelevant information (Guinote, 2007b; 2008; see also Overbeck & Park, 2001). Consequently, powerless individuals show poorer performance in all phases of goal pursuit (Guinote, 2007c): They are slower at setting a

goal and initiating goal pursuit once a goal has been set; they use less flexible means during goal striving, and they persist less in the face of difficulties. Noteworthy is the fact that this research has focused on legitimate power.

A different scenario may occur when power is illegitimate. An unfair or inadequate powerless position elicits anger (Nugier, Niedenthal, Brauer, & Chekroun, 2007), which in turn may orient individuals towards action (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; see also Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). Powerless individuals may also be more inclined to change the system (see Major et al., 2002).

The unfairness and instability of illegitimate power opens an interesting possibility for powerless individuals. Instead of focusing on the social position they have, and the drawbacks of being powerless, these individuals may focus on the social position they want to achieve (Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, 2001). Put differently, because illegitimate power is perceived as inadequate and unstable, powerless individuals may focus on gains rather than losses (Lammers et al., 2008; Willis, 2008). Focusing on gains has a host of beneficial consequences, such as increasing an individuals' sense of control (Langens, 2007).

We propose, therefore, that the negative effects of powerlessness on goal pursuit are ameliorated when power is illegitimate. This prediction is consistent with recent findings indicating that illegitimate powerless individuals, compared to legitimate powerless individuals, engage more in approach behavior, such as risk taking (Lammers et al., 2008). In the present article we argue that illegitimate powerless individuals should also more unequivocally pursue goals. Our focus on powerlessness is justified by the detrimental effects that it generally has on goal pursuit.

We examine the impact of legitimacy on the ways powerless individuals pursue goals, and we focus on different components of goal pursuit. Successful goal attainment

depends on the appropriate completion of the pre-actional and actional phases of goal

pursuit (Gollwitzer, 1996; Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987). Specifically, it requires the

ability to weight different desires and set goals, to generate flexible means to strive for

goals, and to persist in the face of difficulties during goal striving. Failure in any of

these tasks can compromise goal attainment.

We propose that illegitimacy improves the performance of powerless individuals

in all phases of goal pursuit. Accordingly, illegitimate powerless individuals should be

faster at setting goals, should generate more means to pursue goals, and should persist

longer in the face of difficulties, compared to their legitimate counterparts. Two

experiments tested these hypotheses. Study 1 examined goal-setting and goal-striving.

Specifically, it examined how much time powerless legitimate and illegitimate

individuals needed to set goals, and how many means they generated to pursue the

goals. Study 2 examined persistence in the face of difficulties. This second experiment

also included a control condition to better establish the effects of legitimacy.

Study 1

Efficient goal pursuit requires the ability to distinguish between important and

unimportant desires, which initiates faster decisions and goal-setting (Gollwitzer,

Heckhausen, & Ratajczak, 1990; see also Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005; Shah,

Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002). It also requires flexibility in the means used to pursue

goals (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Locke & Latham, 1990). These aspects of goal pursuit were

examined in Study 1.

We measured the time participants needed to set a goal, and the number of means

they generated to accomplish it. Powerlessness and legitimacy were primed using a past

event procedure (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Lammers et al., 2008).

Participants where then presented with scenarios depicting various goal-related

situations. For each scenario participants were asked how much time or information they needed to make decisions and how many means they could think of to implement the goal efficiently. It was hypothesised that illegitimate powerless participants, compared to legitimate powerless participants, would need less time and information to set a goal, and would generate more means to attain it.

Method

Participants

Forty-six undergraduate students from a European University (30 women and 16 men), with a mean age of 20.27 years (SD = 2.06), participated in the study in exchange for course credits. They were randomly assigned to one of the two legitimacy conditions.

Procedure

Upon arrival participants were asked to participate in two different studies: one study focusing on "past experiences", and a pre-test about decisions in everyday situations. Participants wrote an essay about a past situation in which they were illegitimately powerless, or a past situation in which they were legitimately powerless, following Lammers et al. (2008). Specifically, participants were given the following instructions:

"*Remember a particular incident in which someone else had power over you, and that you would define that power as fair or legitimate [unfair or illegitimate]. By power, we mean a situation in which someone had control over your ability to get something you wanted, or was in a position to evaluate you. By legitimate [illegitimate] we mean that the other was [not] entitled (was fair and adequate)[(was unfair and inadequate)] to have power over you".*

Upon completion participants were asked to take part in a pre-test for another study. They were asked to estimate how long it would take them, or how much information they would need, before setting the goals depicted in 4 scenarios adapted from Guinote (2007c). The four scenarios asked participants to make decisions related to renting a room, buying a motorcycle, doing an internship and planning a holiday. For example, one scenario read: *Imagine that you live outside the city and you are moving into the city. You will start looking for a room tomorrow. How many rooms do you think you will need to see before making a decision?* Answers were given in 10-point Likert scales.

Subsequently, participants were asked to generate as many means as possible to successfully accomplish each goal. For instance, participants were asked: *Please list all things you could do in order to select the best option for you.* The number of means generated was our measure of flexibility of means during goal striving.

Results and Discussion

Three foreign participants were excluded from the analyses due to inappropriate language skills.

Goal Setting

First, the answers given to the 4-scenarios were averaged into one score ($\alpha = .69$). This score indicated participants' readiness to set a goal, with lower values reflecting less decision time, and less information needed before the decision. An independent samples *t*-test was then conducted on this score. This revealed significant differences between participants in the illegitimate and legitimate powerless conditions, $t(41) = 2.79$; $p = .008$; $d = .87$. As expected, illegitimate powerless participants ($M = 5.10$; $SD = 1.49$) needed less time to set their goals compared to legitimate powerless participants ($M = 6.47$; $SD = 1.72$).

Flexibility during Goal Striving

The number of different ways to strive for the goals was counted, and averaged across scenarios (α = .67). An independent samples *t*-test conducted on this score showed, as expected, that illegitimate powerless participants (*M* = 2.95; *SD* = .68) generated more means to pursue a goal compared to legitimate powerless participants (*M* = 2.53; *SD* = .54), *t* (41) = 2.24, *p* = .030, *d* = .69).

These results indicate that legitimacy is a crucial factor influencing the ability to quickly set goals and the number of means generated to strive for these goals. When powerlessness was illegitimate, individuals took less time to decide on their courses of action and generated more means to strive for their goals.

Study 2

Study 2 examined an additional aspect of self-regulation necessary for successful goal pursuit: persistence in the face of difficulties (Goeschke & Kuhl, 1993; Gollwitzer, 1996). Moreover, a control condition was included to verify whether powerlessness affects goal pursuit when power is illegitimate.

Participants were asked to search for 12 words embedded in a matrix of letters. In reality, the matrix only contained 8 words, which rendered the task difficult. The total time participants took before they gave up the word search was the measure of persistence in the face of difficulties.

Method

Participants

Participants were 60 undergraduate students from a European University (all were women) with a mean age of 18.88 years (*SD* = 1.50). Participants were assigned to one of the three between-participants conditions (legitimate powerless, illegitimate powerless or control group).

Procedure

Power and legitimacy were manipulated similarly as in Study 1. Depending on the experimental condition, participants were instructed to describe a situation in which they were in a legitimate powerless position, in an illegitimate powerless position, or they described what they did the day before (control condition; Galinsky et al., 2003). As part of a supposedly separate study, participants were invited to complete a 12-word search puzzle, and were asked to try to find all the 12 words. A pre-test indicated that participants could generally find at least 7 words. The task was completed on a personal computer. Participants were instructed to press a key each time they found a word, to write down the word, and to press a different key if they wanted to discontinue the task. The computer recorded how long participants took to find each word, and how long they took to give up the task. After participants had pressed the give-up key or 16 minutes had elapsed, they were probed for suspicion, thanked, debriefed and dismissed. All participants believed that the puzzle contained 12 words.

Results and Discussion

Goal Persistence

Three participants were excluded from the analysis because they did not follow the instructions. A univariate ANOVA on persistence (measured in seconds from starting to ending the task) was conducted, with legitimacy (illegitimate, legitimate, and control) as the between-subjects factor. This analysis yielded a main effect of legitimacy, $F(2, 57) = 3.88$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .12$. To test our hypothesis, a planned contrast was ran in which participants assigned to the illegitimate ($M = 745.24$; $SD = 168.78$) and control conditions ($M = 816.72$; $SD = 150.40$) were compared to participants assigned to the legitimate condition ($M = 681.78$; $SD = 152.75$). In line with previous findings, legitimate powerless participants persisted less than control participants, $F(1,$

57) = 5.31, *p* = .024. However, illegitimate powerless participants did not differ from control participants (*F* (1, 57) = 2.05, *ns*). In other words, when power was illegitimate, powerless participants were as persistent as those who were not in a power relationship.

Efficiency

We interpreted the previous results in terms of differences in persistence. However, it is possible that legitimate powerless individuals were faster at finding the words, and therefore finished the task earlier. We examined this possibility.

The number of words found was not dependent on experimental conditions, *F* < 1. There were also no significant differences regarding the time spent to find existing words, (illegitimate powerless, *M* = 352.68, *SD* = 43.70; legitimate powerless, *M* = 375.57, *SD* = 41.45; and control, *M* = 431.12; *SD* = 39.52), *F* < 1, *ns*. However, as expected, there were significant differences regarding the time participants spent trying to find nonexistent words, *F* (2, 57) = 4.80; *p* = .012, η^2 = .14. That is, when the task became more difficult, legitimate powerless participants (*M* = 196.38; *SD* = 150.84) persisted less than illegitimate (*M* = 298.43; *SD* = 134.52) and control participants *(M* = 340.77; *SD* = 170.04), *F* (1, 57) = 8.53; *p* = .004.

General Discussion

Past research has shown that being in a powerless position has detrimental effects for goal pursuit (Guinote, 2007c). However, this research focused only on legitimate power relations. The present article expands this work by examining the effects of power legitimacy on the performance of powerless individuals. Consistent with previous findings, powerlessness had a negative impact on goal pursuit, but only when participants were primed with legitimate powerlessness. In contrast, when participants were primed with illegitimate powerlessness, their goal directed behavior did not suffer. Specifically, in Study 1, participants primed with legitimate powerlesness were slower

at setting a goal, and were less flexible in the means used to pursue the goal compared

to those primed with illegitimate powerlesness. In Study 2, when goal pursuit was

difficult, participants primed with legitimate powerlesness persisted less in goal striving

compared to control participants, a result that is consistent with past findings. However,

when participants were primed with illegitimate powerlesness, they persisted as much

as their control counterparts.

Recent findings have shown that illegitimacy disinhibits powerless individuals

(Lammers et al., 2008). As the present research shows, illegitimacy also enhances self-

regulation in powerless individuals during goal pursuit. These effects were observed

across different phases of goal pursuit, and were reflected both in the speed of action,

and in the flexibility and persistence during goal striving.

These findings provide initial insight into the role of power legitimacy in goal-

related behavior, helping to establish the boundary conditions of the effects of power.

Furthermore, they highlight a paradox of power. Although powerless individuals

consent power at the service of collective goals, legitimizing it, legitimate power is

detrimental for the powerless individuals involved. In contrast, when power is

illegitimate, powerless individuals are more prone to protest power, yet they are less

affected by power at the self-regulatory level. In a similar vein, studies with non-human

primates indicate that when power hierarchies are unstable, subordinate animals exhibit

less maladaptive stress responses (Rivers & Josephs, in press; Sapolsky, 2005).

One limitation of the present work is that power and legitimacy were manipulated

using a priming procedure. In past research, this priming procedure yielded similar

results to research that used actual role manipulations to induce legitimate or

illegitimate power relations between participants (e.g., Lammers et al., 2008). However,

future research needs to examine power and legitimacy in more realistic power contexts.

It also needs to examine more ecologically valid behavior during goal striving, and to focus on the mechanisms that account for the present findings. In particular, it is important to establish the role of emotions, such as anger, and expectancies of increased power in powerless individuals.

From a broader perspective, legitimate powerlessness helps perpetuate hierarchical systems, given that power differences imply differences in performance, and differences in performance increase differences in actual power (see Vescio et al., 2005). In contrast, illegitimacy renders low power groups more able to oppose the system and engage in collective action (Spears et al., in press). Revolts, social movements, and social revolutions are clear examples showing that, even without resources, illegitimate powerless groups attempt to gain power by creating, developing, and attracting resources (Pfeffer, 1992, Turner, 2005). If past research has indicated that perceived illegitimacy is crucial for collective action and social change, the present work suggests that, at least in part, this may occur through the ways illegitimacy affects self-regulation.

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