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Research Article

When the Boss Feels Inadequate

Power, Incompetence, and Aggression

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ABSTRACT—*When and why do power holders seek to harm other people? The present research examined the idea that aggression among the powerful is often the result of a threatened ego. Four studies demonstrated that individuals with power become aggressive when they feel incompetent in the domain of power. Regardless of whether power was measured in the workplace (Studies 1 and 4), manipulated via role recall (Study 2), or assigned in the laboratory (Study 3), it was associated with heightened aggression when paired with a lack of self-perceived competence. As hypothesized, this aggression appeared to be driven by ego threat: Aggressiveness was eliminated among participants whose sense of self-worth was boosted (Studies 3 and 4). Taken together, these findings suggest that (a) power paired with self-perceived incompetence leads to aggression, and (b) this aggressive response is driven by feelings of ego defensiveness. Implications for research on power, competence, and aggression are discussed.*

A startling 37% of American workers—roughly 54 million people—have been bullied at work, primarily having been sabotaged, yelled at, or belittled by their bosses (Workplace Bullying Institute & Zogby International, 2007). This statistic resonates with research showing a link between social power and aggression (i.e., acts aimed at harming other individuals, physically or otherwise; Fiske, 1993; Georgesen & Harris, 1998; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986; Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001; Kipnis, 1976). However, it also indicates that the link between power and aggression is not universal—after all, 63% of American workers have *not* been bullied at work. These observations raise an intriguing pair of questions: When are power holders most likely to behave aggressively, and why do they do so?

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Psychological Science RESEARCH, THEORY, & APPLICATION IN PSYCHOLOGY AND RELATED SCIENCES

Psychologists have become increasingly interested in this issue (Georgesen & Harris, 2006). One line of research indicates that personality traits moderate the power-aggression link. Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh (2001) found that having power reduces the likelihood of harming others among people who are high in communal relationship orientation, but increases the likelihood of harming others among people who are high in exchange relationship orientation. Other work has shown that the need to protect one's power appears to moderate the power-aggression link; power holders whose power or status is threatened become more dominant (Georgesen & Harris, 2006; Morrison, Fast, & Ybarra, 2009). Additionally, men who associate power with sex are more likely than others to engage in sexually aggressive behaviors when placed in a position of power (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995). In the present research, we moved beyond these initial findings to examine the effects of self-perceptions of incompetence on power holders' tendency to aggress.

POWER AND SELF-PERCEIVED INCOMPETENCE

Power is typically defined as disproportionate control over other individuals' outcomes as a result of the capacity to allocate rewards and administer punishments (e.g., Emerson, 1962; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). In contrast, self-perceived competence refers to perceptions of one's personal ability to skillfully interact with and alter the environment, or, in other words, to be influential (White, 1959). Thus, one can hold a position of power while simultaneously perceiving oneself to have low competence in the domain of power (i.e., low ability to influence other people).

Drawing on this distinction, we propose that a lack of perceived personal competence may foster aggression among the powerful. We base this idea on the notion that power increases the degree to which individuals feel that they need to be competent—both in order to hold onto their power (Georgesen &

Harris, 2006) and to fulfill the demands and expectations that come with their high-power roles (Fast, 2009). It stands to reason, then, that power holders who perceive themselves as lacking in competence should feel especially threatened (e.g., a chief executive officer who feels unable to influence a subordinate would likely feel more threatened than a low-level staff member who also lacks interpersonal influence). Wide-ranging research suggests that threat often leads to an internal state of ego defensiveness (e.g., Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999; Higgins, 1987; Maner et al., 2005; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003; Stone & Cooper, 2001). This defensive state may, in turn, lead power holders who feel incompetent to become aggressive, a common response to ego defensiveness (e.g., Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989). In sum, power holders who perceive themselves as personally incompetent might display aggression as a response to ego defensiveness.

We tested these ideas in four studies, using multiple measures and manipulations of power, perceived incompetence, and aggression to test two main predictions: (a) that power paired with self-perceived incompetence leads to aggression, and (b) that boosts in self-worth eliminate the tendency of power holders who perceive themselves as incompetent to aggress, presumably by reducing the ego threat brought on by the pairing of power and self-perceived incompetence.

STUDY 1

To test our first prediction, we conducted a field study using a sample of working adults. We hypothesized that people who hold positions of power at their places of work but feel chronically incompetent should display higher levels of generalized aggression than other workers.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 90 adults (29 men, 61 women; mean age = 36.3 years) employed in various professions. They were recruited from a national database maintained by a large Western university and were paid $5 for taking part in the study. From their own computers, participants completed measures of work-based power, self-perceived competence, and generalized aggression.

Measures

Power. Participants rated the degree to which their work positions afforded formal authority and power, both measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a great deal*). Responses to the items were highly correlated (r = .62) and were combined to form a single measure of power at work (M = 4.08, SD = 1.97).

Perceived Competence. For an initial proxy for self-perceived competence, we used the 12-item version of the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scale (Leary, 1983). We reasoned that people who chronically worry about others' impressions of them are likely to perceive themselves as lacking in competence. Sample FNE items include "I am frequently afraid of other people noting my shortcomings" and "I often worry that I will say or do the wrong things." Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all characteristic of me*, 5 = *extremely characteristic of me*), and responses were averaged (α = .95).

Aggression. Aggression was measured with the Short-Form Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Diamond & Magaletta, 2006). This established questionnaire reliably measures generalized aggression and includes 12 items, rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *extremely uncharacteristic of me*, 5 = *extremely characteristic of me*). Sample items include "I can't help getting into arguments when people disagree with me" and "Given enough provocation, I may hit another person." Responses were averaged to form an index of aggression (α = .85). We selected this scale both because it is a generalized measure that fits well with our generalized measure of power and because it is strongly predictive of behavioral aggression, including physical violence, verbal abuse, and the tendency to get into fights (Diamond & Magaletta, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Participants' age and sex did not influence our results in this study. We tested our main prediction by regressing aggression scores onto power (mean-centered, continuous), self-perceived incompetence (FNE, mean-centered, continuous), and the interaction term. There were no main effects (also, power and FNE score were unrelated, r = −.09, p = .42). However, the predicted interaction emerged, β = .26, $t(89)$ = 2.57, p = .01, p_{rep} = .95 (see Fig. 1). Simple-slopes analyses revealed that high self-perceived incompetence (1 *SD* above the FNE mean) was associated with aggression among high-power participants (1 *SD* above the mean), β = .41, $t(89)$ = 3.05, p = .003, p_{rep} = .97, but not among low-power participants (1 *SD* below the mean), β = −.09, $t(89)$ = −0.62, n.s. Additionally, power was associated with aggression among participants with high self-perceived incompetence (1 *SD* above the FNE mean), β = .35, $t(89)$ = 2.48, p = .02, p_{rep} = .93, but was unrelated to aggression among those with low self-perceived incompetence (1 *SD* below the FNE mean), β = −.15, $t(89)$ = −1.06, n.s.

These results offered initial support for our hypothesis that the combination of power and perceived incompetence leads to aggression. However, these data are entirely correlational—neither power nor self-perceived competence was manipulated. We addressed this limitation in the next three experiments.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we examined whether people's responses to a primed power role (e.g., Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009;

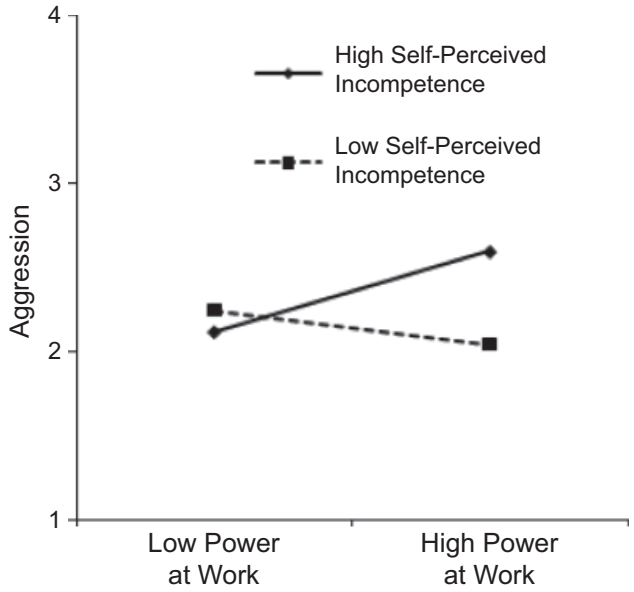

Fig. 1. Aggression as a function of power at work and self-perceived incompetence (fear of negative evaluation) among adults in Study 1. The graph shows predicted levels of aggression for individuals with high and low power (1 *SD* above and below the mean, respectively) who reported high and low incompetence (fear of negative evaluation; 1 *SD* above and below the mean, respectively).

Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003) differ as a function of their self-perceived competence within that role. We predicted that power would lead to aggression—measured in this study as the willingness to expose a stranger to loud and aversive horn blasts—but only when power was paired with self-perceived incompetence.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 98 adults (33 men, 65 women; mean age = 34.5 years) recruited from a national database maintained by a large Western university; they agreed to participate in exchange for the chance to receive $25 in a drawing. This study used a 2 (high vs. no power) × 2 (high vs. low competence) between-subjects design. To assess aggression after the power and competence manipulations, we asked participants to select noise-blast levels for 10 trials of a study on learning that was to take place in the future.

Power and Competence Manipulations

Participants were primed with either high power ($n = 47$) or no power ($n = 51$) and with either high competence ($n = 46$) or low competence ($n = 52$). Those in the high-power condition wrote about a time when they were in a high-power role; those in the no-power condition wrote about the previous day's activities (Galinsky et al., 2003). In addition, those in the high-competence condition were asked to write about an instance (in a high-power role or during the previous day, depending on condition) when they had felt competent (i.e., "had the skills and abilities to be effective in the situation"); those in the low-competence condition were asked to write about an instance (in a high-power role or during the previous day, depending on condition) in which they had felt incompetent (i.e., "didn't have the skills or abilities to be effective in the situation").

Aggression Measure

We used an adaptation of the commonly used and well-validated noise induction paradigm (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Taylor, 1967). In this case, participants were asked to select a series of sound levels for a future experiment on learning and motivation. They were informed that undergraduates would be asked to glean information from written passages and then recall the information. The students would receive a 1-s sound blast (from a horn) for every question they answered incorrectly. Participants were asked to select noise levels for each of the 10 trials. The possible levels ranged from Level 1 (10 dB) to Level 7 (130 dB); a nonaggressive no-noise setting (Level 0) was also offered.

Results and Discussion

Participants' age and sex did not influence the results in this study. There was no main effect of power on aggression, $F(1, 98) = 0.67$, $p = .41$, n.s., nor of self-perceived competence on aggression, $F(1, 98) = 0.77$, $p = .38$, n.s. As predicted, however, there was an interactive effect of power and self-perceived competence, $F(1, 98) = 4.19$, $p = .04$, $p_{rep} = .89$ (see Fig. 2). Among participants in the high-power condition, those who were primed with incompetence were more aggressive ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.06$) than those primed with competence ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(45) = 3.65$, $p = .03$, $p_{rep} = .91$. Among participants who were not primed with power, the competence prime had no effect, $t(49) = 0.79$, $p = .44$, n.s. Additionally, among those in the low-competence condition, high-power participants

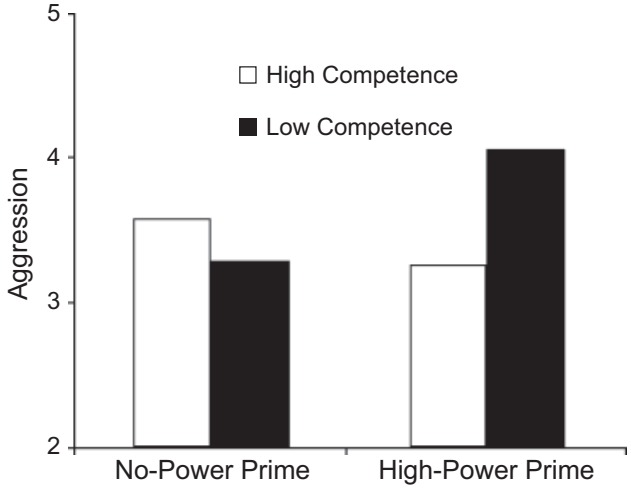

Fig. 2. Aggression (average level of sound blasts selected for stranger) as a function of power and self-perceived competence in Study 2.

were more aggressive ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.06$) than no-power participants ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(50) = 2.18$, $p = .03$, $p_{rep} = .91$. In contrast, power had no effect on aggression among participants primed with high competence, $t(49) = 0.80$, $p = .43$, n.s.

These findings offer additional support for our prediction that power paired with self-perceived incompetence leads to aggression. Participants who recalled an experience in which they felt incompetent in a high-power role displayed more aggression than participants who recalled an experience of feeling competent in a high-power role, as well as participants who were primed with incompetence but not in a high-power role.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we again examined whether power holders with self-perceived incompetence would behave aggressively, in this case by using their power to sabotage a subordinate's chances of winning money. In addition, we tested whether receiving a self-worth boost would eliminate incompetent power holders' tendency to aggress. All participants were placed in a high-power role, were asked to rate their own competence, received false feedback (neutral or positive) about their leadership aptitude, and were given an opportunity to aggress against a subordinate.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 59 university students (16 men, 41 women, 2 unidentified; mean age = 21 years) who were paid $7. They were told they would play the role of a powerful teacher and that their partner (who, in fact, did not exist) would be the less-powerful student. Instructions indicated that teachers would get to select tasks for their students and would evaluate their students' performance. After completing a measure of self-perceived competence, participants were randomly selected to receive neutral ($n = 32$) or positive ($n = 27$) feedback about their leadership aptitude. They then chose tasks for their partners (i.e., the students) that could either help or harm their partners' chances of winning money.

Measure of Self-Perceived Competence

Participants completed four items that measured their perception of their ability to be competent power holders (i.e., capacity to be interpersonally influential). Sample items include "I can get people to listen to what I say" and "Even when I try, I am unable to get my way" (reverse-scored). Ratings were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .78$).

Self-Worth Boost

Participants completed a bogus 15-item leadership aptitude test. Responses were then ostensibly scored, and participants were either affirmed with positive feedback (i.e., told they had "excellent leadership aptitude") or given nonaffirming feedback (i.e., "average leadership aptitude")—in other words, they were either given a self-worth boost or not.

Willingness to Harm Partner

Next, participants were informed that their partners would be competing with other students for a $20 prize; whoever earned the highest combined score on two tasks would win the $20. It was made clear to participants that whether or not their partner won the $20 would have no impact on them personally. Participants selected two tasks—one from each of two pairs—for their partner to complete. Each pair consisted of an easy task and a difficult task (a pretest ensured that the difference in the difficulty of the two tasks was apparent). The first pair included easy and difficult versions of the Remote Associates Test (Bowers, Regehr, Balthazard, & Parker, 1990), and the second pair included easy and difficult versions of an intelligence test. We measured whether or not participants harmed the partner's chances of winning the money by selecting at least one of the difficult tasks.

Results and Discussion

Five participants reported suspicion about the leadership aptitude test and were therefore excluded, leaving 54 participants. Participants' age and sex did not influence results in this study.

Using logistic regression, we regressed aggression toward the partner (dummy-coded: 0 = no harm, 1 = harm) on self-perceived competence (perceived ability to be influential, mean-centered, continuous) and feedback about leadership aptitude (dummy-coded: 0 = neutral feedback, 1 = positive feedback). Self-perceived competence was negatively associated with aggression, $b = -1.68$, $SE = 0.84$, Wald = 4.00, $p < .05$, $p_{rep} = .89$. However, this main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction between self-perceived competence and feedback condition, $b = 1.86$, $SE = 0.96$, Wald = 3.76, $p = .05$, $p_{rep} = .88$ (see Fig. 3). In the baseline (i.e., neutral-feedback) condition, self-perceived competence was negatively related to aggression, $b = -1.68$, $SE = 0.84$, Wald = 4.00, $p < .05$, $p_{rep} = .89$. Thus, as in the prior two studies, the pairing of power with self-perceived incompetence was linked to greater aggression. However, affirming participants' leadership aptitude eliminated this effect, $b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.47$, Wald = 0.15, n.s. In other words, among powerful participants with low self-perceived competence, receiving a self-worth boost via positive feedback reduced aggression, $b = -2.30$, $SE = 1.16$, Wald = 3.92, $p < .05$, $p_{rep} = .88$.

These results extend the previous studies by offering preliminary support for the notion that ego defensiveness is behind the tendency of power holders who perceive themselves as incompetent to aggress. Specifically, participants whose egos received a boost did not behave aggressively. It should be noted, though, that because the positive feedback was related to power aptitude, it may have eliminated aggression simply by neutral-

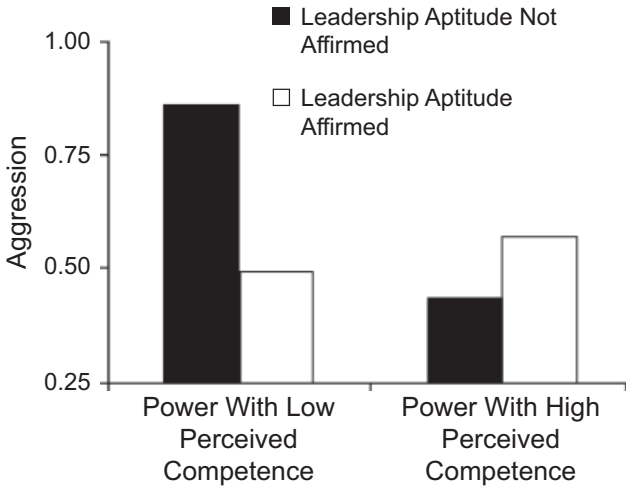

Fig. 3. Power holders' aggression as a function of self-perceived competence (high = 1 *SD* above the mean, low = 1 *SD* below the mean) and affirmation condition (neutral vs. positive feedback about leadership aptitude) in Study 3. In this study, aggression was measured as willingness to harm one's partner's chances of winning extra money, and self-perceived competence was measured as perceived capacity to influence other people.

izing self-perceived incompetence. In Study 4, we tested whether a more generalized self-worth boost (i.e., one unrelated to perceptions of power aptitude) would alleviate aggression among power holders who perceived themselves as lacking competence.

STUDY 4

In Study 4, we further explored the mechanism behind the aggressive tendencies of power holders who perceive themselves as incompetent, using a sample of working adults. We first measured work-related power. Next, we manipulated job-specific competence by having participants write about instances when they either were or were not able to meet a demand related to their jobs. Finally, before measuring aggression, we allowed half of the participants to affirm their self-worth. In contrast to Study 3, which tested the effect of a power-related self-worth boost on aggression, Study 4 used a generic self-affirmation unrelated to power. An effect of this self-worth boost on aggression among power holders who perceived themselves as incompetent would suggest more clearly that power holders react to perceptions of incompetence with aggression largely as an ego-defensive response to threat (for similar arguments, see Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Steele, 1988).

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 163 adults (61 men, 101 women, 1 unidentified; mean age = 34.7 years) in various professions. They were recruited from a national database maintained by a large Western university and were paid $5. All participants rated their power at work and then were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (competence vs. incompetence) × 2 (no self-affirmation vs. self-affirmation) between-subjects design. They then completed a measure of aggression.

Power Measure

Using the same 7-point scale as in Study 1, participants rated their power at work by indicating their formal authority and power. Responses to the items were highly correlated ($r = .83$) and were combined ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.76$).

Perceived-Competence Manipulation

Participants briefly described the demands associated with their jobs. Typical demands among low-power participants involved the completion of tasks (e.g., meeting project deadlines, fixing computer problems), whereas typical demands among high-power participants were more directly related to influence (e.g., supervising and motivating subordinates, winning new accounts). Participants in the incompetence condition were then asked to write about a time when they were unable to meet one of their demands; those in the competence condition wrote about a time when they met one of their demands.

Self-Affirmation Manipulation

From a list of four core values (e.g., business and economics, social life and relationships), participants in the self-affirmation condition selected the value that they considered most important for them personally; they then wrote a paragraph about why that value was important—a task that has been shown to bolster self-worth (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997). In the no-affirmation condition, participants selected the value that was least important to them and wrote about why that value could be important to other people. Thus, all participants engaged in the same activity, but it was affirming for some and not for others.

Aggression Measure

Participants completed the 12-item measure of aggression used in Study 1 ($\alpha = .90$).

Results and Discussion

Participants' age and sex did not influence the results in this study. We regressed aggression scores onto power (mean-centered, continuous), competence condition (dummy-coded: 0 = competence, 1 = incompetence), affirmation condition (dummy-coded: 0 = no affirmation, 1 = affirmation), and the interaction terms. As hypothesized, aggression scores were predicted by a three-way interaction among power, competence, and affirmation, $\beta = -.32$, $t(162) = -2.36$, $p = .02$, $p_{rep} = .93$. In the no-self-affirmation condition, there were no main effects, but the predicted interaction between power and competence emerged, $\beta = .50$, $t(74) = 2.99$, $p = .004$, $p_{rep} = .97$ (see Fig. 4a). As in the previous three studies, self-perceived incompetence increased aggression among high-power participants

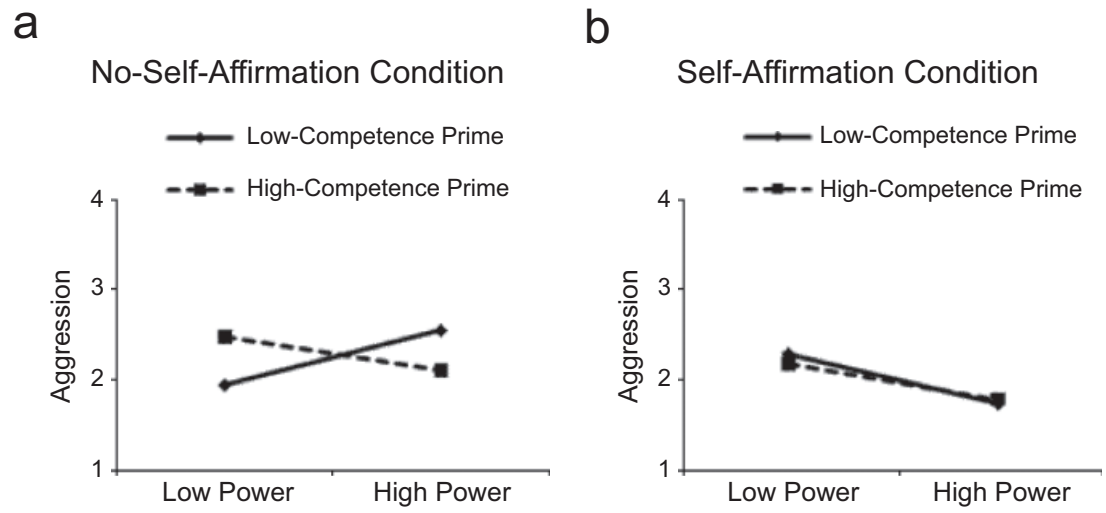

Fig. 4. Aggression as a function of power (high = 1 *SD* above the mean, low = 1 *SD* below the mean) and competence condition (high vs. low self-perceived competence) among (a) non-self-affirmed participants and (b) self-affirmed participants in Study 4.

(1 *SD* above the mean), $\beta = .30, t(74) = 2.04, p < .05, p_{rep} = .89$. Interestingly, the incompetence prime actually decreased aggression among low-power participants (1 *SD* below the mean), $\beta = -.36$, $t(74) = -2.15$, $p = .04$, $p_{rep} = .89$. Additionally, power was positively correlated with aggression among participants primed with incompetence, $\beta = .43, t(33) = 2.69, p = .01$, $p_{rep} = .95$, but not among those primed with competence, $\beta = -.24$, $t(40) = -1.57$, n.s. These effects were completely eliminated among participants in the self-affirmation condition, $\beta = -.06$, $t(87) = -0.43$, n.s. (see Fig. 4b).

These findings offer further support for the idea that power paired with incompetence leads to aggression. Once again, it appears that this effect is not merely due to a failure to meet demands in general (i.e., incompetent low-power participants did not show an increase in aggression), but rather is the consequence of feeling incompetent in a high-power role. Moreover, Study 4 reveals that a simple affirmation that has nothing to do with power can eliminate the effect, offering additional support for the idea that aggression by power holders who perceive themselves as incompetent is driven by ego defensiveness. Finally, it is interesting to note that low-power participants were more aggressive when primed with competence than when primed with incompetence. It could be that low-power participants were inhibited in their reactions to self-perceived incompetence and, therefore, reported particularly low aggression (see, e.g., Keltner et al., 2003). Alternatively, perhaps feeling competent made low-power participants frustrated with their subordinate positions, leading them to feel aggressive. These and other possibilities should be considered in future research.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across four studies that used multiple instantiations of power and competence, we found that self-perceived competence moderated the relationship between power and aggression. When paired with self-perceived incompetence, power led to generalized aggression (Studies 1 and 4), willingness to expose a stranger to loud and aversive blasts of sound (Study 2), and intentional harming of a subordinate (Study 3). Furthermore, this tendency to aggress among power holders who perceived themselves as incompetent was eliminated among those whose leadership aptitude was affirmed (Study 3) and among those who had the chance to affirm an important self-relevant value (Study 4).

These findings offer several important contributions. First, they extend the psychology-of-power literature by showing that power increases reactivity to competency threats. Specifically, a self-perceived lack of competence elicits defensive aggression among power holders, but not among the powerless. This is likely because holding a position of power increases the degree to which one feels one ought to be competent (Fast, 2009). Second, our findings advance research on the determinants of aggression among power holders. Although some researchers have posited that power always fosters derogatory and aggressive tendencies (e.g., Kipnis, 1976), our studies corroborate evidence to the contrary (e.g., Chen et al., 2001). Power led to aggression only when it was paired with perceptions of personal incompetence. This finding parallels evidence that power interacts with threats to one's resources to produce aggressive attitudes and behaviors (Georgesen & Harris, 2006; Morrison et al., 2009), but extends such work by suggesting that power holders are motivated to protect not only their power (i.e., control over resources), but also their egos.

Finally, to our knowledge, these studies are the first to document that power holders have an increased, rather than decreased, vulnerability to potential psychological threats. At first glance, this finding does not seem to fit with the existing literature. In particular, according to the approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003), power activates the behavioral

approach system, which leads the powerful to attend to rewarding aspects of their environments while ignoring potential threats (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). This perspective seems to indicate that power should diminish the degree to which people feel threatened by their own perceived incompetence. However, a closer inspection of approach/inhibition theory indicates that perceived incompetence may block the approach-related tendencies associated with power, making the present results more understandable. Specifically, Keltner et al. (2003) posited that the link between power and approach should weaken or disappear when power holders perceive their power to be unstable (also see Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). Indeed, given the present results, it appears that self-perceived incompetence eliminates the threat-buffering effects associated with an activated behavioral approach system, opening the door for ego defensiveness and elevated levels of aggression.

CONCLUSION

The present findings highlight the importance of perceiving personal competence when holding a position of power. Power holders who do not feel personally competent are more likely than those who feel competent to lash out against other people. Additionally, the finding that self-worth boosts assuage the aggressive tendencies of such power holders implies the effectiveness of a strategy commonly employed by underlings: excessive flattery. It is both interesting and ironic to note that such flattery, although perhaps affirming to the ego, may contribute to the incompetent power holder's ultimate demise—by causing the power holder to lose touch with reality (Kipnis, 1976).

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