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## **Construal of power as opportunity or responsibility**

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# Construal of power as opportunity or responsibility

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## Abstract

Powerholders make decisions that impact not only their own situation, but also the outcomes of those who depend on them. The implications of being in power have been studied in a multitude of research: Social power is known to foster goal striving and to change interpersonal behavior. Yet, prior work has also yielded quite opposing effects of high as compared to low power (e.g., more but also less sensitivity toward others). One aspect that can resolve these inconsistencies is that power does not necessarily mean the same to everyone who experiences it. People can construe (i.e., appraise) high power differently—as an opportunity to freely “make things happen” and/or as a responsibility to “take care of things.” How one’s own power is construed, in turn, moderates the effects of power. The present chapter introduces this theoretical idea on the construal of power and summarizes results from a program of research on it, including its outcomes, preconditions, and a theoretical framework. The chapter integrates prior opposing findings and highlights how a multidimensional approach to power considering the construal of power can contribute to a better understanding of how the powerful behave—but also what makes them more likely to recognize the responsibility that power affords.

“The price of greatness is responsibility.”

*(Winston Churchill)*

“With great power comes great responsibility.”

*(Stan Lee, Spiderman)*

The concept of social power has been intriguing journalists, practitioners, and scientists for several decades (see [Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2015](#), for an illustration of the rise of publications). Indeed, how those high in power behave (e.g., make decisions, weigh risks, or take information into account on how to proceed) impacts not only themselves, but also many others—be it civilians in society, employees in an organization, children at school, or patients in a hospital, to name just a few. Accordingly, understanding the effects of social power is important for many domains in which people (or groups) collaborate or simply interact.

Social power implies asymmetric control over one’s own and others’ outcomes (e.g., valued resources such as time, money, or appreciation; [Fiske & Berdahl, 2007](#)). Being high in power (e.g., as a politician, professor, or manager) provides relative independence; being low in power means that one’s outcomes largely depend on the powerholder(s). Research in social psychology so far has mostly focused on how experiencing high (rather than low) power impacts downstream responses.

A multitude of work on this topic has shown how social power fosters goal striving and changes interpersonal behavior (for reviews see [Galinsky et al., 2015](#); [Guinote, 2017](#); [Tost, 2015](#)). Across studies and labs, however,

the findings show some inconsistent patterns; this inconsistency suggests that it is not adequate to assume unconditional main effects of social power. Regarding many outcomes, research documented contradictory effects. First, on the one hand, social power was found to predict less compassion toward others (Van Kleef et al., 2008); on the other hand, power was also shown to heighten sensitivity to others' feelings (Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). Second, power led to selfish withholding of resources from others in some studies (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Maner & Mead, 2010), whereas in other work, power promoted fair resource sharing (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008; Galinsky et al., 2003). As a third example, powerholders often seem to judge others superficially, to objectify others (e.g., Fiske, 1993; Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Guinote & Phillips, 2010), or even to dehumanize them (Gwinn, Judd, & Park, 2013); conversely, powerholders were also shown to individuate others more carefully (compared to the powerless, e.g., Overbeck & Park, 2001, 2006).

How can we explain and resolve these seemingly contradictory effects? One way to explain these effects from a methodological perspective is that many studies so far have used *one-factorial* designs; that is, prior studies compared the impact of high as compared to low power (and sometimes a control condition with equal power; Galinsky et al., 2015; Guinote, 2017; Schaerer, du Plessis, Yap, & Thau, 2018). As such, social power has typically been treated as a *monolithic* concept. A crucial difference that has not been systematically considered yet is that social power does not mean one-and-the-same thing to everyone who experiences it.

Going beyond, we propose that powerholders can appraise—that is, cognitively construe—power in at least two different ways (Sassenberg, Ellemers, & Scheepers, 2012; Scholl, 2020). Powerholders can construe power as providing an *opportunity* to freely “make things happen” during goal striving—such as in case of a manager recognizing the freedom to freely make investment decisions for clients; yet, powerholders can also construe that very same power as a *responsibility* to “take care of things” that only they can manage during goal striving—as in case of the manager handling clients' retirement funds, or a school teacher dealing with students' education. How power is construed, in turn, should influence the outcomes of power, over and above simply being high (versus low) in power per se. Doing so, we argue that how people respond to power does not only depend on their level of power (e.g., whether they have elevated power or not), but also on how they *construe* power (i.e., recognize what power implies).

This chapter introduces this theoretical idea on the psychological construal of power and summarizes results from a program of research on it. Below, we first (1) define construal of power as opportunity or responsibility. We then (2) summarize recent research on how construal changes specific outcomes of power. Subsequently, we turn to (3) the preconditions that determine when power is construed especially as responsibility (rather than opportunity, as the likely default in Western societies). Finally, we (4) outline avenues for the future and a theoretical framework that connects to self-regulation (e.g., self-regulatory state; Kruglanski et al., 2000) and the perspective of those low in power (e.g., Schaerer et al., 2018).

In doing so, the present work addresses the call that “researchers should mind the differences between structural and *psychological* power in theorizing [...]” (Tost, 2015; p. 52; emphasis added; see also Gawronski & Brannon, 2020) and that “future research needs to build models and theories that take into account the *meanings attached to power*” (Galinsky et al., 2015; p. 447; emphasis added). This endeavor goes beyond prior work with the aims to integrate prior at times opposing findings and to illustrate how a multi-dimensional approach (considering the *construal* of power) can contribute to a better understanding of the effects of high power.



## 1. What does it mean to construe power as opportunity or responsibility?

Experiencing social power is associated with a sense of control and, thus, with the feeling to have the means to achieve goals (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Guinote, 2007a). Yet, even when keeping the level of power high, a person can appraise this relative outcome control in fundamentally different ways—as opportunity or as responsibility.

The most common notion is that people appraise elevated power as an *opportunity* to “make things happen.” This construal provides a great amount of freedom and makes salient all the different possibilities on the way to goal attainment (Sassenberg et al., 2012; Sassenberg, Ellemers, Scheepers, & Scholl, 2014; Scholl, Ellemers, Sassenberg, & Scheepers, 2015). Powerholders who construe power as opportunity, per definition, feel liberated and enabled to do whatever they find important to reach the current agenda. Consider the example of bank managers making decisions about their company’s investments. The managers’ investment decisions affect their own, but also customers’ outcomes. Construing power as opportunity, these managers consider themselves free to follow (their own, the company’s or their clients’) ideas, to make decisions, and to pursue visions.

Yet, a person may also appraise that same high power as a *responsibility* to “take care of things.” In this case, the privilege of having control is seen as entailing commitment to goal achievement (De Wit, Scheepers, Ellemers, Sassenberg, & Scholl, 2017; Sassenberg et al., 2012; Scholl, Sassenberg, Scheepers, Ellemers, & De Wit, 2017). Per definition, powerholders construing power as responsibility feel driven to do what is needed and committed to take care of things that only they can do (due to this asymmetric control)—similar to the idea of “noblesse oblige” (e.g., Vanbeselaere, Boen, Van Avermaet, & Buelens, 2006). Consider the above example of the bank managers, construing their high-power position as responsibility. The managers making decisions would now experience that, because they are in power, *they* are the ones assigned with tasks that “nobody else can do”; they see themselves as enabled and obliged to complete these tasks.

In sum, we propose that people can construe one-and-the same (experience of) power as opportunity and/or as responsibility—be it in case of our bank managers example, or in case of teachers at school, professors at university, leaders of a political party, or CEOs in an organization. Just like the bank managers, teachers may sometimes understand their power and freedom to decide on topics, establish rules for class, and grade students’ projects according to specific criteria as an *opportunity* that they can do all these things freely. At other times, teachers may understand their power as *responsibility*, for instance, needing to make sure that their class successfully completes the course program.

As these examples illustrate, the way a person construes power can *vary*—it is not fixed for a person or specific position but can change depending on the characteristics of the situation. A specific powerholder may, in general, have a strong tendency towards either construal or both. Notwithstanding, specific situations may make each construal more likely (see Section 3). Conceptually speaking, both states of construal are not different poles of one dimension, but rather distinct (or slightly correlated) dimensions. Especially in real life, both may go together—such that reflecting about their powerful position, people might realize both the opportunities and the responsibilities that it provides (e.g., a professor might see both the opportunity to lecture on topics the professor finds interesting and the responsibility to educate the students in their class). Yet, in a concrete situation, a powerholder will likely focus primarily on one of those aspects, rather than construing power simultaneously as responsibility and opportunity.

To be able to examine the specific implications of these two states of construal and how they differ, the focus in this chapter and the studies reported

herein is on the *comparison* between these two: opportunity vs responsibility. This allows for a clear description of the effects of both types of construal and a clear investigation of how construal influences the conjoint role of power and goal content in predicting goal-directed outcomes.

Importantly, construing power differently does not mean sensing more or less power. Construal as opportunity or responsibility is not assumed and more importantly also not found to elicit differences in the *amount* of power a person experiences (for empirical evidence see, e.g., De Wit et al., 2017; Sassenberg et al., 2012; Scholl, De Wit, et al., 2018, which will be summarized with the respective studies below). Similarly, although some examples above for illustrative purposes may have suggested so, different construals per definition do not systematically concern different *tasks*. Rather, construal is equally applicable to, for instance, the tasks of making decisions, ensuring success, or instructing and evaluating those with less power (Scholl, De Wit, et al., 2018). In a nutshell, construing power differently simply refers to the cognitive *appraisal* of one's high-power role; it implies appraising this asymmetric control in a specific way—not more, and not less.

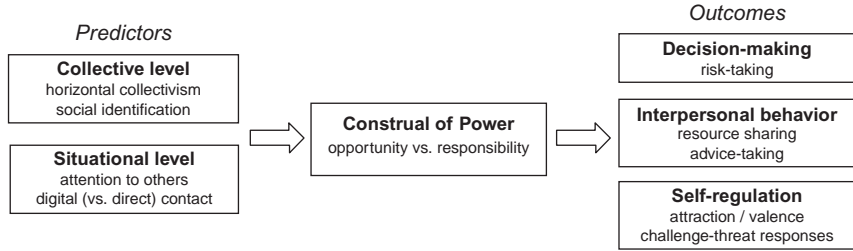


## 2. Construing power differently alters powerholders' behavior

The way in which a powerholder (generally or in a specific situation) construes power will likely affect the way how this person will think, feel, and behave—that is, the outcomes of power. In this section, we briefly integrate central theoretical ideas on how (construal of) power affects outcomes before we introduce and connect experimental and field findings that highlight the implications of power construed as responsibility or opportunity. Fig. 1 provides an overview of the empirical findings integrated here (i.e., as outcomes of power construal) and in Section 3 (as predictors of power construal).

### 2.1 A selective view on standard approaches to power: Power fosters goal striving

To derive predictions on the outcomes of construal, we build upon three established power theories (Guinote, 2007a; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Smith, 2013). These propose that social power influences goal striving via several routes. Emphasizing power-holders' independence, Keltner et al. (2003) proposed that elevated power activates the approach system, promoting a focus on rewards and facilitating action; in



**Fig. 1** Overview of empirical findings on predictors and outcomes of construal of power.

contrast, low power activates the inhibition system, inducing a focus on threats and punishments, and inhibiting action.

As a more nuanced elaboration of the power-approach model, a second theoretical perspective, the Situated Focus Theory of Power (Guinote, 2007a), suggests that the independence of power-holders enables them to more exclusively focus on a focal goal (or salient constructs more generally) than the powerless—meaning that the powerful better recognize and adapt to what is needed to reach their goal in a given situation; in contrast, powerless people will be more distracted by goal-irrelevant cues, as they focus also, for instance, on how others evaluate them (see Guinote, 2007c). Finally, as a third approach the Social Distance Theory (Magee & Smith, 2013) suggests that power increases (perceived) social distance, enabling people to mentally represent a goal at higher (abstract) levels and to focus on what they can do to reach it.

All three approaches converge regarding the notion that high (vs low) power enables people to better focus on and more efficiently pursue their focal goal. Substantial evidence supports this position (for summaries, see Galinsky et al., 2015; Guinote, 2017). Compared to those with low power, powerholders were found to better attend to the goal at hand (Guinote, 2007b, 2008; Schmid, Kleiman, & Amodio, 2015), to take the next steps more promptly toward a goal (Galinsky et al., 2003; Guinote, 2007c), and employ various strategies to reach it (Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, 2002). Powerholders are also more sensitive to information about goal progress and the appropriateness of goal-directed means (Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014a, 2015), more easily shield distractions or obstacles (Guinote, 2007b; Whitson et al., 2013), and are often more effective in reaching an activated goal than those with low power (Lammers, Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2013), to list some exemplary outcomes.

Moreover, evidence suggests that powerholders also behave towards *others* in a goal-focused way—often with the downstream consequence of neglecting the situation of those lower in power, for example, being less responsive to other people (Hogeveen, Inzlicht, & Obhi, 2014), showing stereotyping or objectification as goal-related means (Fiske, 1993; Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Guinote & Phillips, 2010), or ignoring others' advice or suffering (See, Morrison, Rothman, & Soll, 2011; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012; Van Kleef et al., 2008). Notwithstanding the convergence of these findings, there is also evidence on the powerful showing the opposite pattern of responses, namely, showing more individuation or fairness than those with lower power (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008; Overbeck & Park, 2001, 2006). This inconsistency points toward the need for additional theorizing to be able to explain these differential outcomes.

## 2.2 How construal of (high) power may affect the outcomes of power

We argue that the effects of high power documented in the above studies are specific to a construal as *opportunity* but become less likely under a construal as responsibility. The heightened (asymmetric) control powerholders have, together with a construal as opportunity, provide ideal conditions for goal pursuit. Under a construal as opportunity, powerholders' thoughts can center directly on goal-directed information (e.g., which resources are available or what outcome value can be achieved with a goal). Powerholders here will likely adopt a relatively narrow focus on the goal at hand—striving to move on towards goal attainment by showing behavior that is directly aimed at goal achievement. Because construal as opportunity is the likely default in Western cultures (in which much power research was conducted; see Section 3; see also Torelli & Shavitt, 2010), this construal may be the driver for many known effects of high power.

According to our reasoning, however, it is also possible to construe one's power as responsibility. Powerholders here feel obligated and committed not only to achieve the focal goal, but also to live up to the concerns created by the position they have. This construal likely prompts powerholders to deliberate more and consider aspects beyond the specific goal at hand—such as the relevance of the goal itself, whether relevant demands or standards are met, whether one is making progress, and whether there is a benefit from goal achievement (for oneself and/or others). Under this construal, powerholders might very well show behavior that is not only goal-directed, but also reflects

fulfilling additional criteria (e.g., demands or standards). As such, we propose that the construal of power affects the outcomes of power.

**Proposition 1.** *People construing their power as opportunity show thoughts and behavior that reflect an approach that directly focuses on the achievement of the focal goal; by contrast, powerholders construing their power as responsibility show thoughts and behavior that reflect a broader, more deliberative approach during goal pursuit.*

We will now consider evidence from our research and studies from other labs that support this for a wide range of outcomes, ranging from (1) decision-making to (2) interpersonal behavior and (3) self-regulation (for an overview, see Fig. 1).

### 2.3 Decision-making: Construal alters powerholders' risk-taking

Powerholders' ability to focus on the goal is known to affect the way they make decisions during goal striving. For instance, the powerful are quicker to act than the powerless (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2003; Guinote, 2007c; Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014b), persist longer (Guinote, 2007c), and more promptly make a first offer in a negotiation (often affording them better deals; Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007). Furthermore, powerholders limit their level of forethought before making a decision or solving a task (What would happen if...?), unless doing so is clearly beneficial for reaching the goal (Scholl & Sassenberg, 2015). Finally, powerholders are more ready to ponder what they could have done differently when a decision turns out to be wrong (i.e., after failure; Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014a).

One exemplary, well-established finding in research on decision-making is that powerholders are usually more willing than those with lower power to take risks during goal striving (neglecting potential dangers if they fail when their position is stable; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Maner, Gailliot, & Butz, 2007). However, this effect should depend on their construal of power: Powerholders who construe power as *opportunity* likely act in a narrowly focused way in favor of directly taking the next step toward a goal—which likely includes concentrating on potential payoffs and taking risks. For instance, a bank manager construing power as opportunity may feel relatively free to take a chance and make a risky investment. In contrast, powerholders construing power as *responsibility* might be more concerned about which criteria need to be considered (beyond goal progress, e.g., organizational interests or others' outcomes), which should result in less risk-taking. In our example, the manager construing power

as responsibility may be more hesitant to take a risk as this manager considers whether doing so would contribute to the company's success, but also fulfill clients' interests.

A study by [Anderson and Galinsky \(2006, Study 4\)](#) yielded initial support for this idea on a correlational level. The authors manipulated power (high vs low) via recall of a high- or low-power situation and then assessed risk-taking tendencies in a scenario. As predicted, power promoted risk-taking; more importantly, however, additional analyses for the high-power condition suggested that the more high-power participants wrote about the responsibilities they had experienced in the recalled situation (without being explicitly asked to do so), the less willing they were to take a risk. In short, responsibility negatively correlated with risk-taking among high-power participants—here conceptualized as risky sexual behavior that could negatively affect themselves and others. This initial finding suggests that the extent to which people may have construed power as a responsibility moderated the standard effect that power promotes risk taking.

[Scheepers, De Wit, Ellemers, Sassenberg, and Scholl \(2020\)](#) experimentally tested the hypothesis that powerholders will be less inclined to take risks when they are *asked* to focus on the responsibilities, rather than the opportunities that power entails (i.e., adopt a specific construal of power). In a first study, a sample of managers were asked to contemplate and write about their own power position either in terms of the *responsibilities* (e.g., being responsible for their personnel, making sure that things go well) or the *opportunities* (e.g., the possibility to delegate tasks, to set out the general strategy). To measure risk-taking, the manager then completed the BART (balloon analogue risk task, [Lejuez et al., 2002](#)), for which they were asked to pump-up (fictitious) balloons on their computer screen. The goal was pumping-up each balloon as much as possible without making it explode. For each “pump” on a balloon (vs exploding balloon), participants received (vs lost) tokens. The number of exploded balloons served as validated measure of risk-taking ([Lejuez et al., 2002](#)). As hypothesized, managers as real powerholders in the responsibility (vs opportunity) condition took less risks during the first blocks.

In another study, the researchers replicated this result under more controlled conditions in the lab. This experiment implemented a 2 (power: high vs low)  $\times$  2 (construal: opportunity or responsibility) design. As such, it (1) included low-power conditions to be able to contrast these to the two high-power conditions; furthermore, this study (2) assessed people's subjective sense of power to show that the responsibility manipulation does not

lower the level of experienced power (which was indeed not the case). Specifically, checks on subjectively sensed power neither yielded an effect of nor interaction with construal of power—but only a main effect of high vs low power. Accordingly, the construal manipulation did not change the amount of power that people experienced, but only the way said power was construed.

For this study, a sample of undergraduates completed a study on the computer in private cubicles involving a construal mindset manipulation in a sports scenario (following [Sassenberg et al., 2012](#)) and two tasks. The first task on social decision-making was a “delta game,” on which they either received either high or low power. The delta game includes an allocator who makes an offer and a recipient who can either accept or refuse said offer. All participants were allocators and divided several tokens between themselves and the (imaginative) recipient. To manipulate social power, we specified a specific delta value which determines the consequences when the recipient decides to reject the offer. The delta value for participants in the high-power condition was 0.90; this means that if the recipient rejects the offer, allocators still receive 90% of the tokens that they had allocated to themselves. The delta value for those in the low-power condition was 0.00; this means that if the recipient rejects the offer, neither the recipient nor the allocator would receive any tokens. Participants did the allocator-delta task once. After their offer, they proceeded to the second task (and were informed they would later receive feedback on whether their offer was accepted).

The second task measured risk-taking again using the BART. Results showed that in the high-power condition, risk-taking was lower in the responsibility than in the opportunity condition; the way the power role was construed did not impact responses of participants in the low power condition. As such, the results replicated and extended Study 1.

Because the first two studies relied on relatively small sample sizes, a third study replicated the findings with a more substantial sample via implementing a low power condition (where power was not framed in any particular way), a “high power as opportunity” condition and a “high power as responsibility” condition. Participants were said to work with another person on a dyadic gambling task. A resource allocation of tokens would take the form of a “dictator game” where one person (the high-power person) would be the allocator and the other participant (the low power person) the recipient. In the “high power as opportunity” condition, it was stressed that the allocator would have the “opportunity and

freedom” to make the allocations. In contrast, in the “high power as responsibility” condition, participants read that the allocator would have the “task and responsibility” to make the allocations. Risk-taking was measured using the Cambridge gambling task (Rogers et al., 1999). Again, those in the “high power–opportunity” condition took more risks than those in both the “high power as responsibility” condition and the low power condition; the latter conditions did not differ. Interestingly, the effect was stronger on the riskier subset of trials.

Together, these findings offer evidence that whether powerholders do promptly make a decision and take risks depends on how they construe power. Those construing power as responsibility seemed less willing to take risks than those construing power as opportunity. This finding can be interpreted to indicate that the former made powerholders focus not only on prompt goal attainment, but also to consider demands and standards along the way (e.g., if the decision does contribute to goal attainment).

Additional evidence was obtained with a group task in the lab. Here, we assessed powerholders’ willingness to make risky decisions in a business setting (here, operationalized in terms of promotion- vs prevention-oriented choices; Scheepers, Ellemers, & Sassenberg, 2013): Results showed that powerholders made less risky choices when they had something to lose (i.e., belonged to a high-status group, where feelings of *responsibility* were particularly strong) than when they had nothing to lose (i.e., belonged to a group already low in status). Importantly, however, this effect did only occur when it was stressed beforehand that the powerholder would be held accountable (i.e., “responsible”) for the outcomes of the group, and the effect disappeared (and tended to reverse) when the powerholder would *not* be held accountable. Again, these findings show that responsibility (made explicit or subjectively experienced) lowers powerholders’ tendency to take risks.

## 2.4 Interpersonal behavior: Construal of power alters selfishness and advice-taking

Beyond decision-making, how people construe power likely also impacts their interpersonal behavior. The outcomes of power with regard to behavior toward others are manifold; for instance, power can lead to more selfish behavior—such as telling others what to do (Kipnis, 1972), attributing collective success to oneself (Lammers & Burgmer, 2019), withholding information (to protect one’s power; Maner & Mead, 2010), or taking more from a common public good (but also contributing more to it under specific

circumstances; De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008; Galinsky et al., 2003). We argue that such effects depend on power construal. Construing power as opportunity enables powerholders to narrowly focus on the goal at hand (see Proposition 2)—which may often come with the downstream effect of overlooking other aspects (e.g., the welfare and fair share of those lower in power). In contrast, construing power as responsibility should enable the powerful to take other aspects (e.g., people's situation) into account, which likely often results in less selfish behavior.

Though not directly addressing differences in the construal of power, a first set of findings from De Cremer and van Dijk (2008) offers evidence in line with this idea. More specifically, this work outlined the relevance of responsibility for lowering powerholders' selfishness. The researchers found (in Study 2) that powerholders behaved more selfishly in sharing resources than followers. However, this was only the case under conditions in which they seemed to experience low responsibility (because they had been appointed to their leader role by the experimenter); this was not the case when powerholders reported experiencing responsibility (i.e., when they thought they had been elected to their position by followers). Moreover, a follow-up study in this line of research (Study 3) tested the effects of power on selfishness when "responsibility" was made salient (compared to a control condition). Results showed that when responsibility was not made salient, those elected powerholders (who had already experienced high responsibility before) again shared more resources than appointed powerholders (who experienced low responsibility). Yet, when responsibility was made salient, both groups of powerholders showed low selfishness and shared an equally high number of resources. Across the board, this research suggests that being made aware of responsibility mitigated powerholders' selfishness.

Testing the role of both states of construal more directly, the research by Scheepers et al. (2020) mentioned above also demonstrated that construing power as opportunity (vs responsibility) resulted in less fairness toward others. This was the case both for selfishness measured on a dictator game (credits shared with the other person; see DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceranic, 2012; Forsythe, Horowitz, Savin, & Sefton, 1994; Fowler & Kam, 2007) and measured on a delta game (measuring offers made to the other person). For both paradigms, powerholders construing power as opportunity were more selfish than those construing power as responsibility (and those with low power, irrespective of the activated construal mindset). In sum, these studies provide evidence for the central role of construal of power for predicting powerholders' (lower or higher) selfishness.

Moving beyond the domain of social decision-making, in other work, we examined a less direct way of “taking care of others,” namely, the extent to which powerholders consider and value others’ input. Powerholders can be overly confident (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009) and often disregard others’ opinions (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008)—which can mean that they rely on themselves to promptly reach a goal and disregard advice along the way (Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007; Fast et al., 2009; Pitesa & Thau, 2013; See et al., 2011; Tost et al., 2012). Again, we assumed that this tendency to disregard advice may be specific to construing power as opportunity rather than responsibility: When construing power as responsibility (vs opportunity), powerholders likely hesitate more to take the next step toward a goal without considering all information available (like when taking risks). These powerholders will attach more value to other people’s input, contributing to powerholders’ own advice-taking.

A set of studies tested this idea (De Wit et al., 2017). Study 1 was a field study. We investigated how leaders’ construal of their own formal power position at work predicts the level of advice-taking (as rated by their subordinates, to overcome same-source common method bias). Leaders indicated how they *construed* their power at work and how powerful they felt at work in their supervisor–subordinate relationship. Their subordinate(s) answered items on their respective supervisor’s advice-taking. All indicators were measured. Results showed that construal of power predicted advice-taking, moderated by sensed power: Leaders sensing relatively high power seemed to take less advice under a construal as opportunity (rather than responsibility), as predicted. In contrast, for leaders sensing low power, their advice-taking did not depend on construal of power. In other words, leaders sensing high (rather than low) power did seem to take less advice—but only so when they construed power as opportunity, not when they construed power as responsibility. These findings yielded first correlational evidence from two sources that the “effect” of power on advice-taking depends on construal; and vice versa, that for construal to play a role, leaders do need to sense a certain level of power.

To allow for clearer conclusions, Study 2 took an experimental approach in the field, with leaders from Chile and the Netherlands. Among these powerholders, we primed the salience of (a) opportunities or (b) responsibilities. To do so, participants contemplated how their own power role provides either. We also included (c) a high-power control condition in which neither construal was primed to see which construal(s) may

drive the effects (i.e., whether powerholders' "default" tendency would be to construe power as opportunity or as responsibility). We then assessed their actual advice-taking on a subsequent task. Finally, we assessed confidence in their judgments on the advice-taking task as potential mediator.

To make their power salient, all leaders were first asked to briefly describe how their job position provided them with power (i.e., control over others' outcomes). As first part of the advice-taking task, they then completed three estimation tasks (e.g., estimating the costs of an expensive vacation in the Dominican Republic). This task assessed their *initial* estimations. Afterwards, we manipulated construal; participants were asked to recall and recount a recent high-power experience at work in which they (a) had felt a *responsibility* towards other (less powerful) people or (b) had felt certain *opportunities*; in (c) the control condition, they simply recalled and described their last working day. Once the manipulation was completed, participants returned to the three estimation tasks: they saw their initial estimations again plus an estimation from an "expert" on the respective topic. Based on this "expert estimation," they now had the option to revise their estimations (i.e., accept or reject this expert advice) and give a final estimation. This served to measure advice-taking. Finally, they indicated their subjective confidence in their final estimations.

Results indicated that, as hypothesized, participants in the responsibility condition accepted more advice than those in the opportunity and control condition (with no difference between the latter two conditions). Accordingly, opportunity seemed to be the "default" construal in this study (as it was more similar to the control condition than responsibility). Condition did not affect the level of confidence in estimations. As such, this study experimentally replicated findings with a sample of working professionals in high-power roles. The effect did not seem to be driven by lower confidence (measured after the final estimations, potentially reflecting the result of post-decisional rationalization).

Study 3 tested the predictions once again in a more controlled lab experiment and assessed confidence both before and after the final estimation, but also the perceived value of advice and competitiveness as potential mediators. In addition, we assessed the subjective level of power to rule-out that the construal manipulation changes the level (rather than construal) of power are given; this was, indeed, not the case. Participants learned that they would perform a decision-making task with another person (a confederate) under time pressure. After briefly meeting the confederate, each person (confederate and participant) entered their private cubicle; they received

all instruction on a computer screen. They learned that they would complete three estimation tasks (same as in Study 2) in their dyad, and that the best performing dyad would win a bonus. One person in each dyad would be the “team captain” (determining the final solution; high-power role), the other person would be the “advisor” (providing advice to the captain; low-power role). After a short task to legitimize power role assignment, all participants learned that they were the (high-power) “team captain,” and the confederate was their “advisor.”

Construal was manipulated via the high-power role description: The text highlighted especially the opportunity or responsibility (or neither in the control condition) of their role. Then, they performed three estimation tasks (see Study 2). The confederate gave them personalized, but content-wise standardized feedback on each initial estimation via the webcam interface. Again, the confederate’s advice reflected the objectively correct solution. Participants then had the chance to revise their three initial estimations as indicator of advice-taking. They indicated their confidence (also after the initial estimation), the perceived value of the advice, and their own competitiveness at this moment.

As in Study 2, high-power participants more readily accepted the confederate’s advice when they were in the responsibility-construal condition (as compared to both the opportunity-construal and the high-power control condition; the latter two did not differ). Construal neither affected the level of confidence (neither before nor after the advice was given), nor their competitiveness. However, the perceived value of the advice was supported as mediator: Those construing power as responsibility (compared to the other two conditions) perceived greater value in the advice, which in turn predicted more advice-taking. Importantly, additional checks on subjectively sensed power demonstrated that across high-power conditions, participants experienced the same level of high power. This result rules out a potential alternative explanation of the findings that construing power as responsibility might simply make people experience less power.

Taken together, three studies in the field and in the lab supported the idea that construal of power alters powerholders’ tendency to accept (or rather disregard) advice—as one exemplary form of interpersonal behavior. High-power people were more likely to accept advice (both on an “objective” task and as rated by subordinates) when construing their power as responsibility, as compared to opportunity or a high-power control condition. The last study showed that powerholders construing power as responsibility considered others’ input as more valuable and, therefore, accepted more advice. Interestingly, across Studies 2 and 3, the pattern of

the (standard) high-power control condition was more similar to the opportunity than the responsibility condition; this clearly suggests that construal as opportunity was the likely “default” construal of power (at least in the context of the mostly Western samples considered here). To conclude, this set of findings demonstrates that construal of power substantially alters effects of (high) power on interpersonal behavior—namely, in a way that suggests that powerholders take more aspects (input from others) into account when construing power as responsibility (vs opportunity or when no specific construal is activated).

## 2.5 Self-regulation: Construal alters motivational states and physiological responses

Notably, our theoretical argument builds upon the idea that a construal as opportunity enables people to feel free and to focus (only) on the focal goal at hand, whereas a construal as responsibility should also raise awareness of other relevant criteria (e.g., standards or demands; see [Proposition 1](#)). The previous sections provided evidence for this idea in terms of decision-making (e.g., willingness vs reluctance to take risks), selfishness, and advice-taking. The informative value of these outcomes notwithstanding, one can argue that these findings do not directly test and, thus, not yet support the idea of responsibility raising awareness of demands (as compared to opportunity). In the following, we address this question more directly by presenting evidence on (a) the attractiveness of power (construed as opportunity vs responsibility) and (b) the physiological correlates of power construal (which directly result from the evaluation of demands against resources; [Blascovich, 2008](#)).

Regarding the attractiveness of power, for a long time, the general idea in the power literature has been that high power is (often) attractive to possess because it provides many resources, and little demands to fulfill. Supporting this idea, for instance, we found in two studies that (a) experiencing a lack of resources (i.e., being in a motivational state of threat, rather than challenge) or (b) striving for using resources for self-fulfillment (i.e., in a promotion, rather than prevention focus) leads people to find high power especially attractive (and low power particularly unattractive; [Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah, & Brazy, 2007](#); [Sassenberg & Scholl, 2013](#); [Scholl, Sassenrath, & Sassenberg, 2015](#)). In line with our basic argument, however, this effect should especially apply to power construed as opportunity—less so for power construed as responsibility (as the latter is associated with resources, but also greater demands to fulfill).

Sassenberg et al. (2012) investigated this in a set of four experiments. Construal of power was primed again using the sports scenario already described above. Participants imagined having the high-power role of a member of an organizational committee for a sports event. As part of this role, they would decide about the implementation of 12 measures (e.g., whether extensive security checks should be performed on site—which would diminish the danger of terrorist attacks but would also complicate athletes' preparations). To manipulate the construal of this high-power role, participants then judged these 12 measures while adopting a specific focus on opportunity vs responsibility. In the construal-as-opportunity condition, participants judged each measure regarding its contribution to the events' success. In contrast, in the construal-as-responsibility condition, participants judged whether each measure constitutes an ethically responsible action.

As indicators for the outcome attraction of power, we included self-reports (e.g., the attractiveness of a group high and a group low in power) as well as an implicit measure of the evaluation of power via a lexical decision task (Sassenberg et al., 2007). Across studies, we found that (although both construals produced the same level of perceived power), high power construed as responsibility was less attractive to possess than high power as opportunity (especially for those with a promotion focus striving for self-fulfillment). This pattern shows that the attraction of power critically depends on how people construe power; more importantly, however, it also provides evidence in line with the idea that people might associate power as responsibility with greater demands (that are less attractive to fulfill).

Beyond the impact of construal on attractiveness of power, we also investigated the physiological correlates of construal of power as an indicator of the perception of demands (relative to resources). Prior work has shown that high (vs low) power typically boosts well-being (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013) and lowers stress (Akinola & Mendes, 2014; Mehta & Josephs, 2010; Scheepers, De Wit, Ellemers, & Sassenberg, 2012; Wirth, Welsh, & Schultheiss, 2006). This response is likely due to the greater resources that high power provides—both on the objective level (see definition of social power; e.g., Fiske & Berdahl, 2007), but also on the subjectively perceived level (e.g., Fast et al., 2009; Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014a). Yet, if construal as responsibility (vs opportunity) raises awareness of potential demands, then this pattern should change; it should be more pronounced for high power as opportunity, but less so for power as responsibility (with potentially more stress responses in the latter case). We tested this to provide direct evidence for the role of demands in driving the effects of construal.

To be more precise, we focused on threat–challenge responses as captured by the biopsychosocial model of threat and challenge (Blascovich, 2008). The basic idea of the model is (building upon the transactional stress model; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), that people respond to potentially stressful situations based on their evaluation of available demands against resources. In face of a stressful situation (so-called motivated performance situations, such as taking a test or giving a speech), people evaluate the perceived situational demands (“(Is the situation stressful?; e.g., the difficulty of a task) against their perceived personal resources (“Can I cope?; e.g., their skills, abilities). If resources match or outweigh demands, this results in a challenge motivational state (I can cope); if resources fall short of the perceived demands, then a threat state occurs (I cannot cope).”

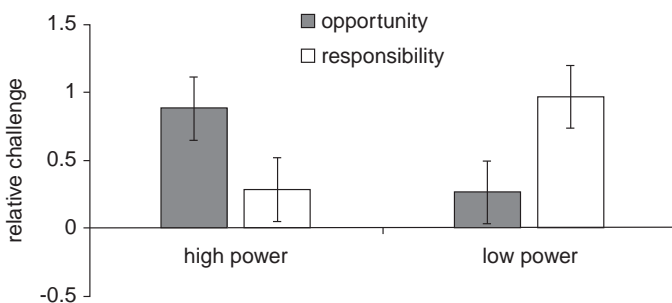
This state becomes evident in a specific pattern of cardiovascular responses (i.e., how efficiently oxygenated blood is transported during task performance) that predicts subsequent performance (Behnke & Kaczmarek, 2018; Blascovich, Seery, Mugridge, Norris, & Weisbuch, 2004; Hase, O’Brien, Moore, & Freeman, 2018; Scholl, Moeller, Scheepers, Nuerk, & Sassenberg, 2017; Seery, Weisbuch, Hetenyi, & Blascovich, 2010). Accordingly, if construal affects the awareness of demands, then it should result in a different cardiovascular pattern: A construal as responsibility (vs opportunity or a high-power control condition) should lead to more threat/less challenge.

We tested this hypothesis in four studies (Scholl, De Wit, et al., 2018). A first experiment sought to rule-out that the effects we may find apply to construal of any role (also a low-power role) as opportunity vs responsibility; accordingly, we manipulated construal (responsibility vs opportunity) and power (low vs high) orthogonally. This allowed us to test the idea that construal of high power (but not low power) as responsibility leads to more threat and less challenge than high power as opportunity. An undergraduate sample completed a simulated business situation, in which participants were told they would make investments in manager–assistant dyads. They were either the assistant making suggestions (low power) or the manager making final decisions (high power) of a well-known investment firm that was now about to reinvest a large amount of money; this reinvestment was presented either as a great opportunity (to increase their clients’ funds, to boot the firm’s income) or responsibility (to secure their clients’ funds and retirement savings, to meet the firm’s corporate social responsibility). They were now about to solve two rounds of investments with feedback, received some basic stock information, and solved a practice trial of an investment. Afterwards, we assessed their subjective level of threat and

challenge for the upcoming task, as well as perceived resources and demands for exploratory purposes. Participants also completed a power manipulation check. Just as in previous studies, only a main effect of power (no effects of and no interaction with construal) on subjective sense of power was observed. Accordingly, the construal manipulations did not alter how powerful participants felt.

Results yielded no main effects but supported the predicted interaction of power and construal on relative challenge: High-power participants with an opportunity construal reported relatively more challenge than high-power participants with a responsibility construal; the reverse was the case for low-power people, who reported more relative challenge under a responsibility than an opportunity construal (see Fig. 2). An exploratory mediation analysis suggested that these effects were explained by a higher demands-to-resources ratio for high (but not low) power as opportunity (vs responsibility). Accordingly, results provided first evidence that (1) construal of high power changes the level of challenge versus threat (potentially resulting from the evaluation of demands against resources), (2) that perceived demands may explain this, and (3) that the effects of construal are specific to high power. A second experiment replicated these effects of high power for a task unrelated to the power role (i.e., a subsequent IQ-Test).

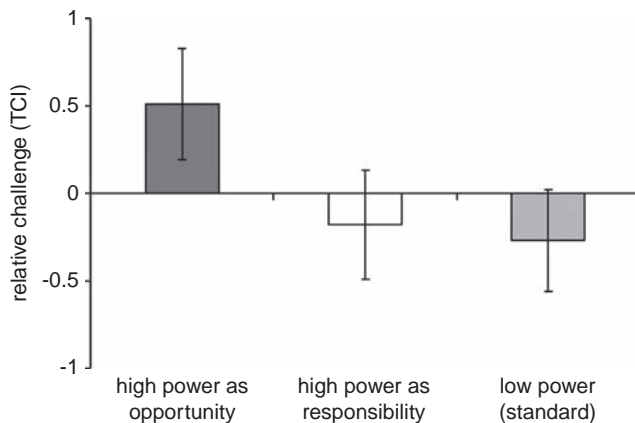
To go beyond self-report, two additional experiments tested how high power as opportunity vs responsibility (vs either a high- or a low-power control condition) affected cardiovascular indicators of threat and challenge—as a more objective, “online” measurement of the actual



**Fig. 2** Relative challenge ratings (higher values indicate relatively more challenge) as a function of Construal  $\times$  Power. From Scholl, A., De Wit, F. R. C., Ellemers, N., Sassenberg, K., Fetterman, A. K., & Scheepers, D. (2018). *The burden of power: Construing power as responsibility (rather than as opportunity) alters threat-challenge responses*. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(7), 1024–1038 (Experiment 1a), Copyright © 2018 SAGE Publications. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218757452>.

responses people show while solving a stressful task (making estimations or giving a speech into the video camera; Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Blascovich, 2008; see also Scheepers et al., 2012). In both studies, participants received a high (or low) power role that was framed in terms of either opportunities or responsibilities; in the last study, there was also a control condition in which (high) power was not framed in any particular way.

In one study (Experiment 2 in the original paper, see Fig. 3), participants were asked to recall an incidence in which they had had high power and this power had meant having either responsibilities or opportunities, or they were asked to recall an incidence in which they had low power. Subsequently, participants were asked to deliver a speech into the web camera, a task that could be appraised as either a threat or a challenge. While doing so, we assessed cardiovascular responses, as compared to baseline responses, which were recorded during a rest period. In the other study (Experiment 3 in the paper), participants received a high-power role—framed either as carrying responsibility, opportunity, or highlighting neither. The procedure was the same as reported above for advice-taking; a team captain (high power role, which was always the participant) made initial estimations then presented these to the advisor (confederate,



**Fig. 3** Relative challenge as a function of Construal of High Power and Power. TCI—threat-challenge index; higher values indicate relatively more challenge and lower values indicate relatively more threat; controlled for speech preparation time. From Scholl, A., De Wit, F. R. C., Ellemers, N., Sassenberg, K., Fetterman, A. K., & Scheepers, D. (2018). *The burden of power: Construing power as responsibility (rather than as opportunity) alters threat-challenge responses*. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(7), 1024–1038 (Experiment 2), Copyright © 2018 SAGE Publications. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218757452>.

low-power role), received advice, and could revise, make, and finally present the final decision. While performing these estimation tasks, we again assessed their cardiovascular responses (as cardiovascular indicators of threat and challenge).

In both studies, we found that cardiovascular responses reflected more relative challenge in the high-power-as-opportunity than in the high-power-as-responsibility condition; the pattern of those in the high-power-as-opportunity condition was similar to those in the high-power-control condition (highlighting no specific construal); again, this suggests that construal as opportunity was the default construal in our (Dutch) sample. Interestingly, the cardiovascular responses of those in the high-power-as-responsibility condition were like those in the low-power condition (see Fig. 3)—even though the former reported feeling more powerful than the latter (and as powerful as those in the high-power-as-opportunity condition). This suggests that powerholders construing power as responsibility likely experience the same level of resources as those construing power as opportunity; but the former are in addition also more aware of demands to fulfill, resulting in a lower challenge and stronger threat response (like those low in power, who perceive low resources and high demands). Again, manipulation checks demonstrated that manipulating the way people construed high power did not change the level of power they experienced, ruling out this potential alternative explanation for the results.

In sum, construal as responsibility (vs opportunity) makes high power less attractive to possess in the first place, and it changes the physiological responses people show while performing a potentially stressful task: Those construing their power as responsibility showed relatively less challenge (and more threat) than those construing their power as opportunity—likely due to the greater awareness of demands to fulfill in the former case.

## 2.6 Conclusions about the outcomes of construal

As the reviewed findings show, construal is clearly important to understand the implications of power—be it regarding decision-making, interpersonal behavior, or self-regulation. The work presented here demonstrates, in line with prior findings from other labs, that power can evoke different types of outcomes (e.g., more or less selfishness or risk-taking)—and how powerholders themselves construe their power provides a useful means to understand and explain these differential and at times contradictory outcomes.



### 3. When is power construed as opportunity or responsibility?

Being aware of the impact of different construals on subsequent behavior and self-regulation ultimately raises the question: When does a construal as responsibility (or opportunity) become more likely? In other words, what are the preconditions of construing power more as responsibility (or more as opportunity)?

Earlier work on power has acknowledged differences in how people take up their role of power but has attributed this to individual difference variables. Along this line, prior evidence suggested that powerholders' personal values or orientations (e.g., [Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001](#); [Côté et al., 2011](#); [DeCelles et al., 2012](#); [Gordon & Chen, 2013](#)) play a role in shaping the outcomes of power. Accordingly, it may well be that these relatively stable predictors influence the way in which powerholders typically construe their power.

Going beyond such comparatively stable aspects, we specifically sought to investigate the role of the (often more flexible) social context. This approach highlights that situational factors can make a difference, which also offers opportunities for interventions (e.g., to implement power roles in a way to support a specific type of leadership, such as more “responsible” leader behavior). In this section, we thus outline the role of predictors of construal of power, especially as responsibility, as the type of construal than seems *not* to be the default in Western cultures (e.g., [De Wit et al., 2017](#); [Scholl, De Wit, et al., 2018](#); [Torelli & Shavitt, 2010](#)).

When are power-holders more likely to construe power either way? As introduced before, we define a construal as opportunity as being aware of the possibilities to “make things happen” along the way to goal attainment, whereas construing power as responsibility means being aware of the obligation and privileges that power provides to “take care of things” (e.g., make decisions) that other people lower in power cannot do. Based on these definitions, we argue that the social context can make a specific goal salient (which powerholders construing power as opportunity will focus more on). Importantly, however, the social context can also make the implications of one's power for people who will be afflicted by one's behavior salient, which should promote a construal as responsibility.

The social context can (generally or in a specific situation) make such implications more salient, for instance, when the far-reaching outcomes

of a decision for others (or even oneself) are highlighted or the consequences for others become salient (for a similar argument see [Zhong, Magee, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2006](#)). Becoming aware of implications of their behavior, powerholders should come to realize that their behavior has consequences beyond the goal at hand for those lower in power, people working in the same organization, or even themselves, facilitating a construal as responsibility. Accordingly, we argue that:

**Proposition 2.** *If the broader implications of one's behavior are not made salient, power is more likely to be construed as opportunity; once such implications do become salient, power is more likely to be construed as a responsibility.*

We now turn to these predictors, starting with the broadest level of culture.

### 3.1 Culture as predictor of construal: Collectivist values in cultures

The broadest factor that might render different implications of power salient is embedded in human culture. Cultures attach importance to specific values (e.g., [Triandis & Gelfand, 1998](#)) and define how people distinguish their own value preferences from those that characterize other cultures. Consequently, cultural values can determine how people assign meaning to power (i.e., how they construe power on a cognitive level).

One exemplary set of values that may shape construal of power is *individualism vs collectivism*. These cultural differences impact on how people define the self—namely, as being more or less independent of (rather than being interdependent with) others. Most cultures value both independence and interdependence ([Jansz, 1991](#)), but cultures can put more or less emphasis on either. Western cultures typically view the self as being independent. Eastern cultures, besides valuing individualism, see the self primarily as being interconnected with others. Such feelings of interconnection especially distinguish those in influential (powerful) positions from influential individuals in more independent cultures ([Miyamoto et al., 2018](#)). Accordingly, in cultures that view the self as being *interdependent*, people may develop a general awareness of implications of their actions. Thus, they may tend to develop an understanding of power as responsibility (see also [Torelli & Shavitt, 2010](#)). In sum, in these cultures, the implications of one's behavior for others should be generally salient. In contrast, in cultures viewing the self as being relatively *independent*, people may develop such a tendency to a lesser extent, facilitating a construal as opportunity.

Indeed, cultural values do seem to influence how people appraise power. [Torelli and Shavitt \(2010\)](#) demonstrated that (vertical) individualism (i.e., a striving to distinguish oneself from others and to gain status via competition) is associated with construing power in personalized, potentially opportunity-related ways; in contrast, (horizontal) collectivism (i.e., emphasizing common goals, but not submitting to an authority) rather predicts construing power in terms of responsibility for taking care of others. Additionally, [Zhong et al. \(2005, as cited in Zhong et al., 2006\)](#) asked participants to complete a reaction time task to assess the association strength of the word “power” with targets representing “responsibility” (e.g., duty, obligation) or “entitlement” (e.g., deserve, earn). Participants from (individualistic) Western cultures associated power more with “entitlement”—potentially indicative of construal as opportunity; in contrast, participants from (collectivistic) Eastern cultures associated power more with “responsibility”—as indicative of construal as responsibility.

Similarly, even within the same cultural context, individuals who prioritize different values differ in how they construe power. A study conducted in our lab showed that, within a Western (German) sample of undergraduates, individualist values predicted greater perceived opportunity in a high-power role ( $r(143)=0.31$ ,  $P<0.001$ , but not greater perceived responsibility ( $r(142)=0.07$ ,  $P=0.422$ ); in contrast, collectivist values predicted greater perceived responsibility ( $r(142)=0.28$ ,  $P=0.001$ , and also opportunity,  $r(143)=0.24$ ,  $P=0.004$ ; [Scholl & Sassenberg, 2021](#), unpublished data).

To conclude, we argue that cultural values emphasizing collectivism, face, honor, or other aspects (e.g., long-term orientation) make implications of power differentials for others or oneself salient. As a result, the more a culture emphasizes (or a person values) relational aspects beyond individualism, the more it may facilitate construal as responsibility. Conversely, the more a culture or person focuses solely on individualistic values and independence, the more likely it is that individuals construe power as opportunity.

### **3.2 Group-level predictors of construal: The example of social identification**

Beyond culture, group-level factors can make the implications of one’s actions salient and thereby influence the construal of power. In a specific social context, a person can either view the self as independent from others (e.g., in case of a salient personal identity)—such as when group membership

is not very relevant or when individually competing with others in the group (e.g., for a promotion in the workplace). In contrast, a person can view the self primarily in terms of the connections to others. This is the case when a shared social identity is salient (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and/or situational factors make powerholders aware that they belong to the same social category or organization as those with lower power.

Accordingly, one important group-level factor that likely influences construal of power is social identification: The more value people attach to a group that they belong to (i.e., the stronger their social identification)—the more they are motivated to engage in favor of that group. People here shift their concept of “self” from a personal identity (“I,” differentiating oneself from others as an individual person) to a *social* identity (“we,” considering oneself as belonging to a joint group). This shift means that this person’s personal interests move to the background, while the implications for the group and its members become the main focus (Brewer, 1979; Ellemers, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). As the Situated Focus Theory suggests (Guinote, 2007a), especially those high in power respond to this greater salience of implications (more so than those low in power). Accordingly, we predicted that powerholders (as compared to those with lower power) should more likely recognize their responsibility when they strongly (as compared to weakly) identify with the group (e.g., people of their generation) to which they and the powerless (e.g., “subordinates”) belong.

Two studies tested this predicted interplay between power and social identification on perceived responsibility (as an indicator of construal as responsibility; Scholl, Sassenberg, Ellemers, Scheepers, & De Wit, 2018). Study 1 was an online study for which leaders (as real-life powerholders) reported their subjectively experienced power at work, their social identification with the organization, and their level of perceived responsibility (and opportunity) towards others when making decisions at work in their role. Study 2 then tested the predictions in a more controlled environment, experimentally manipulating power (high vs low) and identification (high vs low).

Results for the field study (Study 1) yielded the expected power-by-identification interaction on responsibility. When leaders were strongly identified with their organization, a stronger sense of being in power correlated with a stronger perceived responsibility; conversely, when leaders were weakly identified with the organization, a stronger sense of social power predicted less perceived responsibility. An additional analysis on

“attitudes towards power misuse” (toward own ends) yielded a similar interaction: The greater experienced power was, the more favorable leaders reported being toward power misuse toward their own ends—but only when being weakly, not when being strongly identified with their organization. Thus, in this first field-study we found that identification predicted perceived responsibility among leaders who feel powerful.

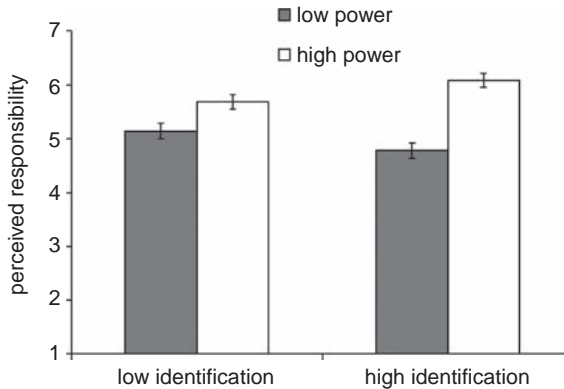
To replicate these findings experimentally, Study 2 manipulated social identification (high vs low) and power (low vs high) orthogonally. To manipulate level of identification, participants were asked to recall an experience with an ingroup they belonged to (i.e., their generation of “young people”) that had made them happy (high identification) or angry (low identification) to belong to said group (see [Kessler & Hollbach, 2005](#)). Afterwards, they were told they would collaborate with a person from that ingroup in a manager-assistant dyad. Here, they were either the manager (high power) or assistant (low power) of an art gallery; before starting their task of organizing an art exhibition together, participants indicated the responsibility (and opportunity) they perceived for their respective partner, which served as our measure of power construal. They also completed a power manipulation check, which yielded a power main effect, as intended, but no effects of or interaction with social identification.

The main results of Study 2 revealed the expected interaction (see [Fig. 4](#)): High-power people perceived greater responsibility than low-power people in the high-identification condition (but less so in the low identification condition). Exploratory results on perceived opportunity only yielded a main effect of high (vs low) power. Accordingly, power increased the level of perceived opportunity and the level of perceived responsibility—but the latter was more strongly so when identification was high (rather than low).

Taken together, these findings illustrate and support the role of group-level predictors for power construal. Similar effects may occur for other factors on this level—including, for instance, group norms in an organization that include the expectation that powerholders should use their power for others’ benefit (see [Tost & Johnson, 2019](#)).

### 3.3 Situational predictors of construal: Salience of others

At the most concrete level, a specific social situation can make implications of one’s actions salient. For instance, a concrete situation can be structured in a way that consequences are salient (e.g., when powerholders are made aware of potential power or status loss in case of a wrong decision).



**Fig. 4** Perceived responsibility as a function of Social Identification  $\times$  Power. Copyright © 2017 John Wiley and Sons, The British Psychological Society. *Reproduced with permission from Scholl, A., Sassenberg, K., Ellemers, N., Scheepers, D., & De Wit, F. R. C. (2018). Highly identified power-holders feel responsible: The interplay between social identification and social power within groups. British Journal of Social Psychology, 57, 112–129 (Study 2).*

Alternatively, the situation may cause other people more generally to become more salient (e.g., when powerholders have close contact with others). In such situations, the powerholder faces a situation in which implications of their behavior are salient, which may facilitate a construal as responsibility.

Indeed, some research findings suggest that powerholders feel more responsible when other people's contribution to one's powerful role becomes salient (i.e., among leaders who were elected by followers, rather than appointed by the experimenter; [De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008](#)). Moreover, two sets of findings from our lab directly tested and supported the role of salient others more generally. To do so, a first set of studies sought to make (implications for) others more or less salient by manipulating the extent of direct (face-to-face or digital) contact power holders anticipated to have with those depending on them. In the second set of experiments, we made others more or less salient by drawing the attention of research participants (prior to the assignment of power) either to others or to the self.

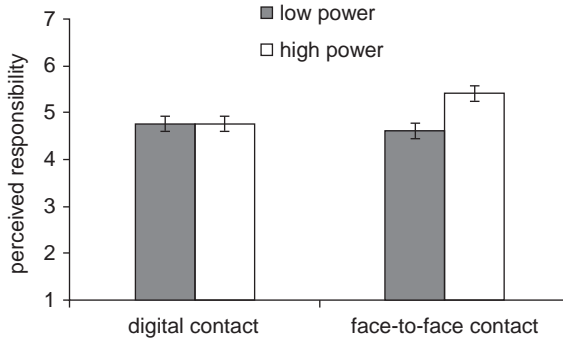
Specifically, [Scholl, Sassenberg, Zapf, and Pummerer \(2020\)](#) examined the role of type of contact in powerholders' construal of power—to make implications of one's behavior (here, for others) more or less salient. Digital contact (vs face-to-face contact) with others often implies less social

presence of (i.e., greater experienced distance from) interaction partners (e.g., Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Nielsen, 2017; Sassenberg, Boos, & Rabung, 2005). Accordingly, the mere anticipation of having solely digital, rather than face-to-face, contact with others should make implications of one's actions for others less salient. Accordingly, we predicted that when those high in power anticipate (direct) face-to-face contact, they should experience more responsibility for others than those low in power; yet, the impact of power on the experience of responsibility should be less pronounced when anticipating (indirect) digital contact—because in the latter case, other people and implications of one's behavior for them should be less salient, in the sense of “out of sight, out of mind.”

Study 1 manipulated power (high vs low) and anticipated contact (digital vs face-to-face) among employees in a work context; Study 2 used the same procedure for a sample of undergraduates. Participants in both studies imagined working as assistants making suggestions (low power) or as managers making final decisions and evaluating their assistant (high power) in a firm. To allow them to engage with their role, they completed a set of tasks (e.g., evaluating their office decoration, finding their office on a floor plan, etc.). In this task their office reflected their power role, with a large, single office for the manager and a smaller, shared office for the assistant (see Inesi, Botti, Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2011).

To manipulate anticipated type of contact, participants learned that they would organize an event together with their manager or assistant, respectively, whose office was in another building. They either read that their collaboration would take place via digital means (digital contact condition) and saw a set of tools they would be able to use (e.g., telephone, e-mail); or they read that their collaboration would be face-to-face in a meeting room and saw a set of tools to use there (e.g., a flipchart, a laser pointer). To encourage participants to anticipate the situation as vividly as possible, they wrote down a few notes on how they would organize the collaboration under these conditions. Afterwards, we assessed the level of perceived responsibility (and opportunity) study participants anticipated feeling for their assistant/manager, respectively, during the collaboration. This served as indicator for construal of power differentials as responsibility (or as opportunity).

Results supported the main prediction: Powerholders anticipating face-to-face contact experienced more responsibility than powerholders anticipating digital contact (and compared to both low power conditions, with digital or face-to-face contact; see Fig. 5). As was the case in prior studies, the experience of opportunity was only found to depend on the degree of

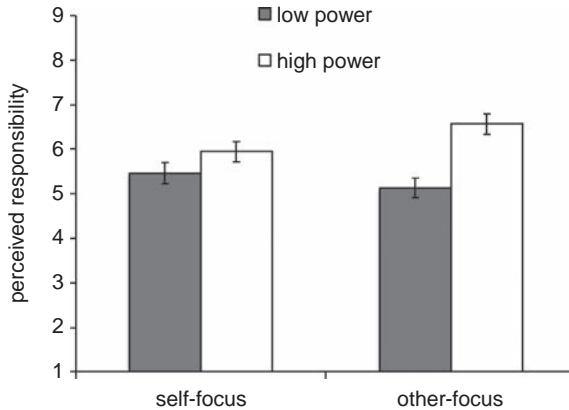


**Fig. 5** Perceived responsibility as a function of Anticipated Contact  $\times$  Power. Copyright © 2020 Elsevier Ltd. *Reproduced with permission from Scholl, A., Sassenberg, K., Zapf, B., & Pummerer, L. (2020). Out of sight, out of mind: Power-holders feel responsible when anticipating face-to-face, but not digital contact with others. Computers in Human Behavior, 112, Article 106,472 (Study 2).*

power: high power led to seeing more opportunity than low power. As such, the results suggest that concrete aspects of the social context—such as the type of contact people anticipate—might make (implications for) others more or less salient and influence the way how those in power construe their power (as responsibility).

In another set of studies (Scholl, Sassenberg, et al., 2017), we directly manipulated the salience of others. The basic idea was to draw powerholders (and powerless people's) attention directly to another person (rather than the self) and examine whether this would foster responsibility. In three studies, we asked people first to focus their attention on the self (recalling a personal positive event and answering questions on the consequences for them) or on another person they knew (recalling a positive event that this person had experienced and answering questions on the consequences for him/her). Afterwards, they received either a high or low power role; in two experiments, this was an assigned role as organizer of a sports event (Experiment 1, only high-power role) or as manager or assistant in a firm (Experiment 2; same as above; adapted from Inesi et al., 2011). In the final experiment (Experiment 3), we used a more subtle manipulation (adapted from Weick & Guinote, 2010) in which people evaluated other people's creative ideas from an alleged creativity contest and learned that their evaluations would be included in the final decision (high power) or would not have an impact on the final decision of determining the winner (low power).

After completing these manipulations, we assessed perceived responsibility (and in some studies we also examined additional outcomes, such



**Fig. 6** Perceived responsibility as a function of Attentional Focus  $\times$  Power. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley and Sons, The British Psychological Society. *Reproduced with permission from Scholl, A., Sassenberg, K., Scheepers, D., Ellemers, N., & De Wit, F. R. C. (2017). A matter of focus: Power-holders feel more responsible after adopting a cognitive other-focus, rather than a self-focus. British Journal of Social Psychology, 56, 89–102 (Experiment 2).*

as opportunity, objectification, closeness to the other person, etc.). We predicted that high-power people (compared to low-power people) would perceive more responsibility after having focused their attention on another person, but not after having focused their attention on the self. Results supported this line of reasoning (see Fig. 6). That is, we found evidence that even this relatively subtle manipulation of the salience of (implications for) others can influence the extent to which powerholders construe their power as responsibility.

### 3.4 Conclusions about the predictors of construal

The results of the studies reviewed here show that contextual features on three different levels are relevant to the way powerholders construe their position. Characteristics at the cultural (or interindividual), group context, and situational level can (potentially interactively) influence how likely people are to be aware of different implications of a high-power position. In addition to considering opportunities to achieve the goal at hand, these factors also impact on the likelihood that they consider the broader implications of their behavior. We have seen that this can foster responsibility construal among the powerful. When studying power, it is thus important to examine the extent to which the context at hand does or does not make salient the broader implications of power—which will likely bring

powerholders to construe their power primarily as opportunity or responsibility, respectively. Studies using different types of paradigms and measures offer evidence that cultural values, group identification and salience of others' outcomes invite a responsibility construal among the powerful.

On a cautionary note, we need to acknowledge that much of this research examined perceived social responsibility among the powerful—that is, responsibility for taking care of others. Though this work is clearly informative regarding designing interventions to foster responsibility, it is still unclear if these effects are also (partly) driven by salient social goals (i.e., reflect the goal content of benefitting others, not only a specific construal). As a result, future research should investigate more predictors of construal to disentangle them more clearly from the type of goal (e.g., individual, task, or social goal) that people pursue (see [Scholl, 2020](#)). We discuss this possibility in more detail in [Section 4](#).

In sum, we argue and show that psychological construal processes—which also depend on situational features—guide the way in which powerholders exercise their power. This is an important advance beyond prior work that has attributed differences in how people respond to high power mainly to more *stable* individual differences. The insight that *situational* features foster a different construal of power, and hence invite a different response of those in power, provides very practical steppingstones; these may be used for interventions to foster responsibility among those wielding power in organizations and society.



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## 4. Future directions for studying power construal

In this final section, we seek to (1) link our research to more general self-regulatory processes which underlie a variety of important social phenomena (e.g., locomotion and assessment mode; [Kruglanski et al., 2000](#); implemental and deliberative mindsets; [Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Steller, 1990](#)); this allows us to extend the explanatory scope and substantiate our model while also outlining potential avenues for the future to study how exactly construal may shape subsequent outcomes. We then (2) connect construal of power (especially as responsibility) to other approaches to responsible power use, and leadership, before we (3) integrate our reasoning and findings into a model, especially outlining the potentially moderating role of which type of goal a person pursues (i.e., goal content). Finally, we (4) discuss practical advantages and disadvantages of either construal in terms of practical implications, and (5) outline the implications of our analysis from the perspective of those with lower power.

## 4.1 Linking construal to self-regulatory mechanisms

So far, we have linked construal of power to a number of outcomes (decision-making, interpersonal behavior, and self-regulation in terms of threat challenge responses). A question that remains, however, is by which means construal shapes such outcomes of power—in other words, what are the mechanisms driving these effects? Here, we propose that powerholders' self-regulatory state may represent a primary pathway through which salience of opportunity/responsibility impacts on downstream responses of powerholders.

When powerholders construe power as an opportunity to achieve goals they value, they will likely apply strategies that directly aim at making progress (moving on) toward these goals. Such a self-regulatory state is referred to as *locomotion mode* in Regulatory Mode Theory (Kruglanski et al., 2000). In this state, people strive to get things done and act toward the goal without much consideration of their surroundings or of alternative goals or means (Kruglanski, Orehek, Higgins, Pierro, & Shalev, 2010; Kruglanski et al., 2000). This self-regulatory state also relates to what is referred to as an *implemental mindset* in goal striving (Gollwitzer et al., 1990). This term indicates that, rather than contemplating the appropriateness of their goal, people's thoughts focus on the question how to implement the next steps toward the goal.

These self-regulatory states, in turn, promote those types of outcomes that reflect people's striving for such goal progress—similar to the outcomes we expected and found for power as opportunity: For instance, a locomotion state promotes hastened movement, improved performance on many tasks by increasing the tendency to “do something,” and tempting people to consider less information (Kruglanski et al., 2000). Studies have documented that people in an implemental state are oriented toward goal-directed action (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995), have a relatively narrow attention focus (Büttner et al., 2014), and show a relatively low openness to alternatives (see Gollwitzer & Kinney, 1989; Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987) while being confident to succeed (Gollwitzer & Kinney, 1989; Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995). Very similar effects have been shown in cases where high power is likely to be construed as opportunity. For instance, as long as responsibility is not made salient, the powerful are typically more ready to act, focused on goal-relevant information, and show higher confidence (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2003; Guinote, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; See et al., 2011; Tost et al., 2012). The observation of these parallel effects suggests there may be a link between construal as opportunity and self-regulatory states and outcomes that characterize locomotion.

In contrast, we argue that construing power as responsibility—and thus feeling committed to live up to standards created by this privilege should reflect a different type of self-regulation (and outcomes). Powerholders here may apply strategies aimed at assessing what to do and trying to “do things the right way.” Such a self-regulatory state is referred to as *assessment mode* (Kruglanski et al., 2000), in which people critically evaluate and compare options of goals or means to choose the best one before starting to act. This state also relates to a so-called *deliberative mindset* (Gollwitzer et al., 1990), in which people compare goals and possible actions while weighing the expected consequences of each.

The self-regulatory state of assessment and deliberation (just as a construal as responsibility) benefits goal-directed outcomes that are not only oriented toward attaining the goal but aim to fulfill additional demands or criteria along the way. Assessment is known to be associated with relatively more critical thinking and considering more information. This typically also results in the experience of more stress (e.g., in case of ambiguity), while taking into account what is considered important or “right” by others. For instance, people in an assessment state have been found to accept the potential risk of procrastination or not getting started in the first place (see Kruglanski, Pierro, & Higgins, 2015; Pierro et al., 2008; Pierro, Giacomantonio, Pica, Kruglanski, & Higgins, 2011). They also tend to prefer leadership that considers formal standards and/or others’ welfare beyond the goal at hand (see Kruglanski, Pierro, & Higgins, 2007; Orehek, Fitzsimons, & Kruglanski, 2014), and typically develop a relatively realistic view of action–outcome expectancies (Gollwitzer & Kinney, 1989). Similarly, a deliberative state has been found to promote a relatively broad focus of attention. For instance, deliberation allows for the evaluation of potential achievements and consequences of goal attainment, and openness to all incoming information (compared to locomotion or an implemental state; Büttner et al., 2014; Gollwitzer & Kinney, 1989; Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987; Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995). These outcomes match behavior known for powerholders who construe power as responsibility (e.g., less attractiveness of power, less challenge; Sassenberg et al., 2012; Scholl, De Wit, et al., 2018; higher openness to information; De Wit et al., 2017).

In addition to noting these parallels, we have also conducted a series of studies to obtain more direct evidence on the relation between locomotion versus assessment and situational construal (Scholl, Wenzler, Ellemers, Scheepers, & Sassenberg, 2021). Across seven data sets we noted that,

independently of their power, people's perceived responsibilities correlate positively with assessment—and more strongly so than opportunities do. At the same time, perceived opportunities correlate positively with locomotion (while perceived responsibilities do so less strongly). This further supports our reasoning and sets the stage for additional empirical tests of the link between these two literatures. Taken together, results so far suggest that construal of power can be connected to specific strategies that people can follow to strive for the achievement of salient goals and important outcomes. As such, future research might elaborate on this connection between the construal of power and self-regulatory strategies. This would not only advance our understanding of the mechanisms bringing about the effects of construal, but also offers possibilities for a broader connection between these distinct areas of inquiry.

## 4.2 Connecting power construal to prior conceptualizations of responsibility

To understand the potential implications (and benefits) of the proposed framework, it is crucial to reconnect our propositions not only to previous empirical results, but also to prior theoretical approaches on power and responsibility. We are certainly not the first to propose that power can be associated with different meanings and, especially, with responsibility (for an overview, see [Table 1](#)).

Some previous approaches focused on why people may want to obtain power in the first place and suggested that responsibility may play a role. [McClelland \(1985\)](#) and [Winter \(1991, 1992\)](#) suggested that people strive to attain power either (1) to reach personal goals (i.e., influence others, gain impact etc.; [McClelland, 1985](#); [Winter, 1991, 1992](#)) or (2) to reach social goals (i.e., to benefit or understand others; [McClelland, 1985](#); [Winter, 1992](#)). While the latter was connected to responsibility, a key difference to our current analysis is that these accounts focus on why a person wants to attain power in the first place, while we address how people come to construe power once they have it.

Addressing the latter aspect, some prior approaches have also examined how people exercise (rather than construe) power once they have it (e.g., [De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008](#); [Torelli & Shavitt, 2010](#); [Tost, 2015](#); [Zhong et al., 2006](#)). These all note that people can associate power either with (1) personal goals (i.e., benefit the self), or (2) social goals (i.e., benefit other people). For instance, [Torelli and Shavitt \(2010\)](#) suggested that people can differ in the specific beliefs, attitudes, goals, and behaviors they hold about

**Table 1** Construal of power and its similarities and differences to related concepts

	<b>Construal of power</b>	<b>Power motives</b>	<b>Power conceptualization</b>	<b>Network of power-related concepts</b>	<b>Ethical leadership</b>
Source	The current framework	McClelland (1985) and Winter (1992)	Torelli and Shavitt (2010) and Zhong et al. (2006)	Tost (2015)	De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008)
Question	What does power <i>mean</i> ?	<i>Why</i> do people strive to attain power?	What <i>should</i> people <i>do</i> with power?	What do people <i>associate</i> with power?	What <i>does</i> a person do with power?
Focus on	Appraisal	Motives	Attitudes	Associations	Behaviors
Treated as	Trait or situationally activated	Trait predictor (interpersonal)	Trait predictor (intercultural)	Activated by stable predictors (culture, gender, etc.)	Behavioral outcome (leadership style)
Main idea	<p>People can cognitively <i>appraise</i> power differently</p> <p>Motives, goals, behaviors not part of the definition; both construals can refer to self- and/or other-oriented concerns</p>	<p>People strive to <i>attain power</i> for different reasons</p> <p>Clear link either to selfish motives (gain impact) or other-oriented motives (benefit others)</p>	<p>People <i>associate goals &amp; attitudes</i> with power</p> <p>Clear link either to selfish goals (attain prestige) or other-oriented goals (benefit others)</p>	<p>People <i>associate</i> concepts with power in a <i>cognitive network</i></p> <p>Clear link either to selfish (agentic) or other-oriented (communal) behavior</p>	<p>People show more or less ethical <i>behavior</i> when being in power</p> <p>Is evident in clear behavioral outcomes (e.g., benevolence, fairness toward subordinates)</p>

and associate with power (see also Zhong et al., 2006); accordingly, people may understand power in “personalized terms” (associate it with personal goals) or “socialized terms” (associate it with collective goals). Along a similar line, Tost (2015) suggested that experiencing power in organizational contexts may evoke a sense of social liberation or social responsibility; the latter, then, is defined as a “feeling of obligation to act in ways that *benefit others*” (Tost, 2015; p. 46; emphasis added).

Finally, leadership research also acknowledged the importance of responsibility among the powerful to ensure the functioning of hierarchies (which commonly denoted under the term “ethical leadership”). This field considers responsibility as a multidimensional concept that is defined via specific outcomes: “that a person ‘means it’, feels an inner obligation to do what is known to be right, is dependable and can be ‘counted upon’” (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; p. 299), is “honest, trustworthy, fair, and caring” (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005, p.120) and refrains from performing any evil acts against others (Brown et al., 2005; Kanungo, 2001). In sum, these approaches suggest that people associate power with different (selfish or other-beneficial “responsible”) goals and behave accordingly.

In contrast, we propose that power can be seen as responsibility and/or as opportunity. This is distinct from prior approaches, in that construal explicitly refers to the way powerholders, on the cognitive level, appraise power. Is it (only) the control over valued resources (i.e., their freedom) that they perceive, or are they also mindful and aware of the responsibilities bound to their position? In practice, these two types of construal may often relate to either self- or other-beneficial goals, beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors (as suggested by earlier approaches).

Importantly, however, self- vs other-directed goals, etc. are *not*, per definition, part of the concept of construal. Construing power as opportunity can be associated with a self-oriented agenda (striving freely toward personal gain), an other-oriented agenda (freely bringing organizational or team goals forward), or even a task-oriented agenda (making progress on an individually performed task). In parallel, construing power as responsibility can be associated with an other-oriented agenda (taking care of team success), a self-oriented agenda (keeping up one’s own well-being as a leader), or a task-oriented agenda (making sure that this task is completed). Of course, this distinction of which type of goal people seek to achieve is clearly important. Yet, when it comes to the definition of construal of power as responsibility and opportunity, we regard the type of goal as being orthogonal to

this conceptualization of construal. Rather, we integrate goal content together with power construal into a framework described in the following.

### 4.3 Toward a theoretical framework

As noted from the outset, previous work on power yielded partly contradictory findings. We observed that power lowers compassion (Van Kleef et al., 2008), but heightens interpersonal sensitivity (Schmid Mast et al., 2009). Likewise, power leads to selfish (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2003; Maner & Mead, 2010), but also to fair behavior (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008; Galinsky et al., 2003). And power tempts people to disregard others (e.g., Fiske, 1993; Goodwin et al., 2000; Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Guinote & Phillips, 2010), but also to carefully attend to others (e.g., Overbeck & Park, 2001, 2006).

We proposed that considering the construal of power constitutes one way to explain these contradictory findings. We argued that in many cases, lower sensitivity and more selfishness among the powerful will occur when power is construed as opportunity—but less so when power is construed as responsibility. We reviewed a program of research that offers direct evidence for this reasoning and documents predicted outcomes (e.g., selfishness; Scheepers et al. (2020); considering others' input; De Wit et al., 2017). Indeed, other studies have also shown less selfish, “corrupted” behavior among the powerful when exposed to a manipulation that explicitly mentioned powerholders' responsibility to take care of others (e.g., Schmid Mast et al., 2009; Study 1). We argue this may have facilitated a construal of power as responsibility (rather than the “default” construal as opportunity).

#### 4.3.1 *The role of goal content*

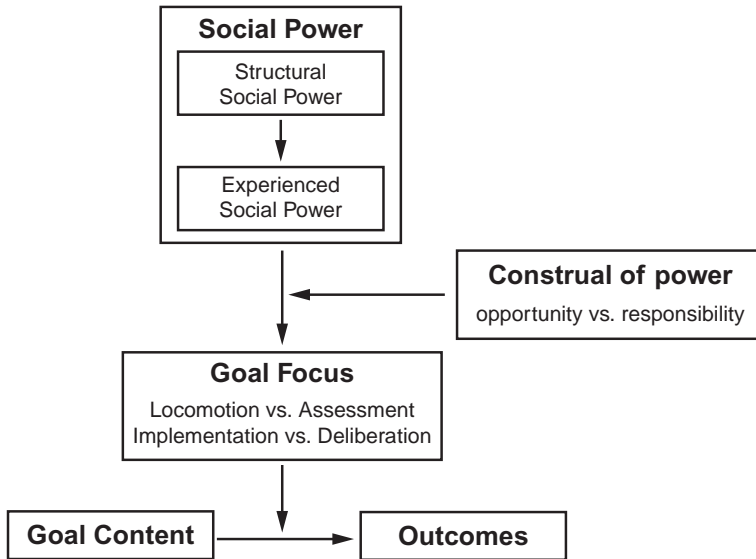
Notwithstanding these results, to fully understand the outcomes of power across different contexts, it is important to consider the type of goal as an additional aspect that may direct people's concerns to different aspects of their power position. Theoretical approaches to power suggest that social power will enable people to better focus on and engage on behalf of a specific goal. As a corollary of this idea, the type of goal in focus (i.e., which end-state the power holder seeks to achieve) needs to be considered beyond the construal of power. The goal content may be self-oriented (e.g., a personal goal to further one's career, outperform others, or reduce personal workload), other-oriented (e.g., to promote team performance, help others, or contribute to others' welfare), or simply task-oriented (e.g., to complete the task or identify the best decision without considering immediate benefits

for oneself or others; see also Scholl, 2020). Which type of goal people pursue depends on multiple factors, such as the organizational mission, individual preferences, task instructions, or situational affordances (e.g., Cantor, 1994; Gibson, 1977). Like a signpost giving directions, the type of goal (goal content) predicts relevant foci during goal striving (e.g., selfish, prosocial, or task-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors). High as compared to low power should simply boost this relation (via enhanced goal focus).

Going beyond this approach, we have argued that construal of (high) power matters for (a) how much powerholders will focus on the goal at hand (or also consider additional demands), and (b) potentially, which self-regulatory strategies they will apply on the way during goal striving. Integrating these ideas into a common framework (see Fig. 7) suggests that goal content (i.e., the type of goal in focus) will determine people's thoughts, actions, and feelings during goal striving, and that social power boosts this relation via improved goal focus. Yet, this moderating effect for high power critically depends on how this power is construed (as responsibility or opportunity) and potentially which self-regulatory strategies may follow from this construal.

Accordingly, both goal content and the construal of power may jointly influence outcomes among the powerful—such as their behavior toward others, or their likelihood to reach the goal. Interestingly, this means that two powerholders focusing on the same type of goal may show different goal-directed outcomes (because they construe their power differently). Vice versa, two powerholders focusing on different types of goals may show similar goal-directed outcomes (because they construe their power similarly).

To give a few (nonexhaustive) examples: Powerholders who construe power as opportunity and strive toward a social goal (e.g., high status for the team) likely share much information with the team members—just like powerholders construing power as responsibility—just because doing so helps them to make progress toward said goal. Likewise, even powerholders who construe power as responsibility may keep important resources to themselves—just like those construing power as opportunity—when a personal goal is activated and doing so allows them to take additional demands into account (e.g., making a good impression on other powerholders by proving that they are resourceful). Taking a reverse perspective, one can thus also conclude that powerholders helping team members may do so, for instance, (i) because these powerholders construe power as responsibility to take care of things (including team members' situation), (ii) because these



**Fig. 7** Theoretical framework integrating the role of construal of power in explaining how type of goal (goal content), power, and construal of power predict goal-directed outcomes.

powerholders construe power as opportunity to make things happen and helping others does ensure goal progress, or (iii) because they follow an activated social goal (under either construal).

#### **4.3.2 The role of structural and subjectively experienced power**

Finally, the relation of objective and subjective power (as well as construal of power) deserve closer inspection. As outlined in the very beginning of the chapter, a person can objectively have (structural) power (e.g., as part of a leadership position) and/or subjectively experience power (e.g., in a specific situation). These two are most likely linked to each other, such that objective power facilitates subjective feelings of power and may, thereby, predict behavioral outcomes of power.

This reasoning is in line with prior findings (e.g., [Anderson & Berdahl, 2002](#)) that social power exerts its effects via the subjective experience of power, and it also fits prior approaches on how disentangle power on an objective and subjective level ([Tost, 2015](#); here referred to as structural vs psychological power). To take a broader perspective, this general idea can be integrated with the functional-cognitive framework (e.g., [De Houwer, 2011](#)). In terms of this framework, objective power is an aspect of the

environment that influences behavioral outcomes (functional level of analysis), whereas subjectively experienced power represents a mental construct that explains how objective power may affect these behavioral outcomes (cognitive level of analysis).

Importantly, taking the construal of power into account suggests that subjective power alone is likely insufficient to understand the effects of structural power on behavioral outcomes (at the functional level). Rather, we would argue that how people construe the power they experience needs to be considered as another important variable at the cognitive level.

To conclude, both construal of power (among the powerful) and goal content likely play a role and need to be taken into account when trying to understand the implications of power for goal striving across different situations. Our reading of prior work is that it often focused on social power in the lab and/or concerned individually performed tasks (i.e., likely making an individual or task goal salient) without directly taking the goal content and/or construal into account. Accordingly, more studies are needed to disentangle the effects of construal under clearly defined (different) types of goals.

#### **4.4 Practical advantages and disadvantages of either construal**

From a practical point of view, our framework raises the question of which construal may be more effective for organizations, leaders, followers, and all these parties in the long run. Note that any answer to this question ultimately depends on “normative” assumptions about what constitutes desired behavior; providing such answers is not in the realm of empirical social psychology. Still, we discuss several potential assumptions that could be of interest from an applied point of view.

On the one hand, it is typically important for powerholders (e.g., in organizations) to be successful and move forward toward goal attainment; on the other hand, powerholders also need to carefully consider other aspects around them (e.g., their subordinates’ situation or organizational requirements) to secure support from others, to motivate subordinates, and to adapt to an organizations’ potentially changing requirements. How might they balance these diverging concerns, and how may the two types of construal relate to this in the long run?

##### ***4.4.1 Potential implications of construal as opportunity***

Construing power as opportunity—and being in a locomotion regulatory state—may result in prompt goal progress that benefits oneself (e.g., success

under a salient personal goal), even at other people's potential costs or disadvantage—which may make those lower in power feel overlooked, lowering satisfaction and contributing to distress and willingness to quit (e.g., [Tepper, 2000](#)). Hence, in the absence of counterveiling forces, construing power as opportunity in combination with personal goals may harm interpersonal relationships and undermine followers' support. Yet, power as opportunity can also result in goal progress that benefits others—for instance, when achieving a social goal promotes others' welfare. Beyond this, construing power as opportunity may prove beneficial for a powerholder's own success—because this powerholder likely stays focused on the goal (rather than being “distracted”). This could benefit others in the long run, even independently of the specific type of goal in focus: In work settings, goal progress often not only benefits the powerholders, but their team and organization could also benefit from it (e.g., gain prestige).

#### **4.4.2 Potential implications of construal as responsibility**

Construing power as responsibility—and being in an assessment regulatory state—can enable powerholders to make well considered decisions, to consider multiple relevant aspects (e.g., up- and downsides of a decision for themselves, for others, and the organization), and prevent ill-considered actions. Accordingly, powerholders construing power as responsibility may typically take extra care to consider all information and interests, which can contribute to performance and others' welfare. These benefits notwithstanding, power as responsibility could have its costs for the powerholder. In extreme cases, these powerholders may never cease to weigh options and consider countless criteria beyond the goal at hand to “make everyone happy.” This strategy may slow down decision-making, distract from the goal, and limit success in reaching it. Moreover, doing so can make a powerholder appear indecisive, frustrate followers ([Webb, Coleman, Rossignac-Milon, Tomasulo, & Higgins, 2017](#)), and ultimately undermine performance.

Finally, extensively figuring out how to do things the right way may be stressful for the powerholder. Indeed, people in an assessment mode typically find decision-making very stressful, as they are afraid to make the wrong decision ([Chen, Rossignac-Milon, & Higgins, 2018](#)). This idea resonates with our findings that construal as responsibility (vs opportunity) can induce physiological threat (rather than challenge; [Scholl, De Wit, et al., 2018](#)). This suggests that these powerholders likely experience more stress, which in the long run is also linked to lower performance and health ([Behnke & Kaczmarek, 2018](#); [Blascovich, 2008](#)).

In sum, one construal should not generally be considered a “better” way to reach goals and ensure good collaboration than the other. Accordingly, from a practical point of view, combining “pros and cons” of each construal may be ideal. Mirroring this idea, approaches on locomotion and assessment suggest that neither regulatory state is generally (i.e., across contexts) better than the other. Rather, to be effective, a person needs to be able to show both types of regulatory states (Kruglanski et al., 2010). One possibility to do so would be by switching easily and flexibly between construals as a powerholder. In some situations (e.g., when quick decisions need to be made), a construal as opportunity can be preferred. In other contexts (e.g., when decisions require carefully weighing complex information against each other and taking long-term consequences into account), powerholders should be able to switch to recognizing their responsibility. We are not aware of any research on the ability to switch construals; accordingly, this idea clearly remains to be tested in the future.

#### **4.5 Expanding perspectives: The view of the powerless and their power construal**

Finally, we need to recall that social power is about a social relation between at least two parties—one having high, one having low(er) power. Although some studies presented here also address those low in power, this chapter did focus on the powerful and how they construe high power. Yet, one may just as well wonder about the perspective of those low in power: One interesting aspect here is whether and how those with low power depending on the powerful recognize these powerholders’ construal of power (and potentially the type of goal being pursued).

After working together for some time, powerholders may have clearly communicated how they see their power (e.g., to set the work climate in their team). Even if they have not done so explicitly, those with less power (e.g., followers) may over time have come to develop a relatively valid understanding of their powerholder’s characteristic (goal content and) construal from observing powerholders. This understanding may help the powerless anticipate and make sense out of powerholders’ behaviors. If, for example, subordinates recognize how their leader construes power, this may influence their professional relationship. A match between powerholders’ construal (and regulatory state) and subordinates’ regulatory state may prove effective and reinforce each other in many cases—because, for example, a powerholder striving to “move on” may be more motivating for a subordinate with the same regulatory tendency, and vice versa (rather

than who tries to “do things right” and carefully assess every step; see [Sassenberg & Hamstra, 2017](#)). Similar assumptions may apply for a match of goal content.

Another intriguing possibility, for which we are not aware of any systematic research yet, is whether the powerless can construe their own low-power position differently—as providing them (despite their low control) with some opportunity or responsibility. Our framework so far focused on the construal of power among the powerful. We did so because, for one, research so far largely focused on those high in power (often treating those low in power as a comparison group, e.g., [Schaerer et al., 2018](#)); accordingly, most of the evidence so far builds upon those high (vs low) in power. Second, the behavior among those high in power (and their construal) often has more immediate consequences for a wide range of people as compared to the behavior of those lower in power. Notwithstanding, it would be highly interesting to focus more on the powerless in future research on power (construal). One can imagine that powerless people construing their position as providing them with some opportunities could see this as a chance to prove themselves as they hope to gain more control over time—at least if they do perceive some opportunities and manage to stay focused on the goal. Similarly, powerless people construing their position as entailing some responsibility could see this as a dilemma between feeling responsible to contribute, but not being able to influence too much; alternatively, they could see this as a chance to enjoy their limited responsibility and let others handle those things they have little control over.

Indeed, findings about challenge–threat responses ([Scholl, De Wit, et al., 2018](#); Experiment 1a) suggest that the effects of construal might reverse for those low (vs high) in power: Responsibility (vs opportunity) lowered challenge among the powerful, whereas responsibility (vs opportunity) promoted challenge among the powerless. These speculations offer interesting questions for future research, also in response to recent calls to focus more on the perspective of those with lower power ([Schaerer et al., 2018](#)).



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## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter proposed that to understand the role of power for goal striving, it is essential to consider how powerholders appraise power (and accordingly how they likely strive to achieve said end-state), and potentially also the type of goal in focus. Specifically, we suggested powerholders construing power as opportunity will focus on

and move toward the goal at hand, whereas powerholders construing power as responsibility will take additional demands and concerns (beyond the goal) into account, potentially refraining from action until having secured that they can do things “the right way.” Empirical evidence from prior work clearly supports the role of power construal for decision-making, interpersonal behavior, and self-regulation. Moreover, we identified factors at the cultural, group, and situational level that serve to predict construal of power—outlining possible ways how to understand or foster the preconditions under which each construal becomes more likely across different contexts. Notwithstanding this emerging evidence, several further questions remain to be addressed in the future—starting with a direct and thorough test of the interplay between construal and goal content in guiding goal striving among those low and high in power. Doing so enables us to gain a comprehensive understanding of when and why powerholders may be more effective in reaching goals, as well as, for instance, the extent to which they consider not only their own, but also other people’s welfare.

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