Cheating to Win or Not to Lose: Power and Situational Framing Affect Unethical Behavior

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Abstract

Power has long been associated with corruption, yet most evidence has been linked to abuses for gains (money, resources, sex). In this article, we propose a conceptual framework that considers unethical conduct to obtain gains and to avoid losses. Following the situated focus theory of power (Guinote, 2007), we propose that power flexibly orients individuals' cognitions and efforts in line with active goals. Under a gains frame, compared to the powerless, the powerful should be more motivated to obtain gains and cheat more, in order to protect these gains. Under a loss frame, the powerful should experience a temporary activation of loss aversion goals, while the powerless should experience a chronic activation of loss aversion goals. Consequently, power differences in corruption levels should only occur for gains and not when losses are at stake. The effects of power and frame were demonstrated in one study (N = 321). The findings provided initial evidence supporting the notion that an understanding of the effects of power on corruption necessitates a consideration of contextual framing.

Keywords: social power, framing, dishonesty, goal-attainment, loss aversion

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It is estimated that the global cost of corruption is at least 5% of the world's annual GDP, amounting to approximately 2.6 trillion U.S. dollars (World Economic Forum). Corruption is often enacted by those who hold power. From lush privileges to handing out favours to allies, power abuse for personal gains appear common. Even though some empirical evidence backs up this observation (Bendahan et al., 2015; Giurge et al., 2019), evidence is inconsistent (see Foulk et al., 2020; Fleischmann et al., 2019), and research remains incomplete. In addition, evidence has focused mainly in the domain of gains (e.g., cheating for money and other resources). An understanding of whether power affects ethical conduct in the same manner when losses are at stake, remains conspicuously absent. This article aims to contribute to the understanding of the links between power and corruption, in the presence of gains (under a gain frame), as well as losses (under a loss frame). This fine-grained examination will enable us to better predict when power corrupts.

Transparency International defined corruption as "The abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Pope, 2000). Powerful individuals have greater discretion, and are more able to abuse power compared to other individuals. Several studies have supported this line of thought in the contexts of power abuse (Case & Maner, 2015; Foulk et al., 2018). Conceptions explaining the links between power and corruption (e.g., Kipnis, 1972) proposed that having power negatively biases individuals towards self-serving goals, and limits their consideration of social norms (Dubois et al., 2015; Galinsky et al., 2006).

The tendency for power to corrupt is however not universal. The last two decades have been marked by research on the role of individual differences, and how such personal factors interact with power to predict ethical conduct (DeCelles et al., 2012; Lee-Chai et al.,

2001; Sassenberg et al., 2012). Power magnifies authenticity (Guinote et al., 2002; Kraus et al., 2011). Consequently, whether power corrupts will depend on the person in power, and their ethical orientation. To illustrate, when power is construed as an opportunity, and not a responsibility (Sassenberg et al., 2014), power holders show less care for others (De Wit et al., 2017; Scholl et al., 2018). Similarly, power amplifies an individual's pre-existing level of moral awareness (DeCelles et al., 2012), demonstrating the importance of baseline individual differences of those in power.

In spite of abundant evidence supporting these claims (Chen et al., 2001; DeCelles et al., 2012; Sassenberg et al., 2012), in other studies, the role of the person was absent or nuanced (Foulk et al., 2020; Scholl et al., 2018). For example, power can magnify an individual's active cognition in either direction, both antisocial, and prosocial (DeMarree et al., 2014). Contextual influences can play a major role in the ethical conduct of the powerful (Lammers et al., 2011; Fitzgerald et al., 1997). The powerful can act in line with predispositions or not, depending on accessible constructs (Guinote et al., 2012). In addition, as noted above, past research claiming that power corrupts predominantly focused on contexts associated with gains, such as sexual opportunities, money, or other valued outcomes (Bargh et al., 1995; Lammers et al., 2011). Less is known about contexts associated with losses, which are common experiences for both the powerful and the powerless.

In the present article, we propose to advance conceptions of the ways power affects corruption by incorporating the role of situational frames. Our aim is to contribute to a much needed understanding of *when* and *why* power corrupts considering the broader context, and people's motivational processes across levels of the power hierarchy. Drawing on the situated focus theory of power (Guinote, 2007; 2010) we argue that the powerful can be flexibly motivated to attain gains or avoid losses. In comparison, as past research has demonstrated (Inesi, 2010; Keltner et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2008; Steidle et al., 2013), the powerless are

loss averse, without the flexibility to respond to situational cues. Consequently, the powerful will be more unethical than the powerless when gains are salient, but not when losses are salient.

Power and Situational Frames

Power can flexibly activate a part of self-knowledge that is relevant to the situation (Guinote, 2007), energizing individuals towards desired end states (Guinote & Chen, 2017). For example, the powerful can pursue both self-serving goals and pro-social goals depending on the affordances at hand (Galinsky et al., 2003; see also Guinote, 2008). Goals can be chronically or situationally activated. Chronic goals would be closely tied to the predispositions of the person, while situationally activated goals could be linked to external influences, such as the task at hand. Guinote and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that both chronically and temporarily accessible constructs can guide the judgments of powerful people. In one study, prosocial individuals with power were more willing, while those who were pro-self were less willing to distribute resources, compared to their powerless counterparts. However, despite chronic preferences, this tendency was cancelled out when the situation instilled counter-dispositional priorities. This demonstrates that accessible goals play a decisive role on the behavior of power holders.

Even though power has been conceptually linked to the activation of the behavioral approach system (Keltner et al., 2003) which implies an orientation towards opportunities, rewards and gains, this may occur preferentially when gains are salient. Furthermore, at times, the dynamic context of organizations and the social sphere necessitates power holders to be alert to pitfalls and losses. Evidence in the domains of power legitimacy (Lammers, 2009), and threats to one's competence (Fast & Chen, 2009) suggest that the powerful are

indeed responsive to threats. That is, power holders can both pursue gains and avoid losses, which should depend on the goals triggered by the context.

Framing is vital in how individuals make choices under uncertainty. People tend to prefer avoiding losses to acquiring equivalent gains (loss aversion, Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, Tversky & Kahneman, 1991). Consequently, framing asymmetrically influences ethical decision making (Grolleau et al., 2016; Kern & Chugh, 2009). People cheat more when faced with the potential threat of losses compared to when faced with potential gains. For instance, an experiment found that the desire to avoid a negative outcome (avoidance goal) predicted academic cheating among students, while the motivation to obtain a positive outcome (approach goal) in the same context did not (Niiya et al., 2008) - consistent with loss aversion. Crucially, the same study found that among men (traditionally a group with social power), approach goals were associated with cheating, which contributed to the main effect of gender on academic cheating.

Power and Framing Preferences

Preferences for Gains

Power holders possess a heightened sensitivity to gains and rewards (Keltner et al., 2003), and are energized to take action (Galinsky et al., 2003). Power has been shown to increase optimism in risk perceptions, leading to increased risk taking (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). Powerful individuals are more oriented towards valued goals and opportunities compared to their powerless counterparts (Guinote, 2007; 2017; Schmid et al., 2015). For example, in a taste study, power holders ate more appetizing food (chocolates), and ate less unappetizing food (radishes) compared to powerless individuals (Guinote, 2010). Thus, it can be argued that frames related to gains better fit the chronically accessible goals of power holders compared to their powerless counterparts, presumably because the former individuals

more frequently encounter opportunities for gains compared to the powerless. The action orientation of the powerful should occur when gains and opportunities are salient and afforded in the given context (Guinote, 2008). This suggests that under gain frames the powerful should be more motivated, and consequently more dishonest than the powerless (Table 1).

Preferences for Loss Aversion

At the valuation stage of a decision with multiple possible outcomes (e.g., Corr & McNaughton, 2012), potential losses loom larger than gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Loss aversion is prevalent in a wide array of contexts, such as in relation to money (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) or other resources (Kahneman et al., 1990). Importantly, loss aversion influences ethical conduct (Grolleau et al., 2016). When the odds of an outcome are framed in loss terms rather than gains, the propensity for unethical behavior increases, in order to avoid the negative outcome (Kern & Chugh, 2009; Schindler & Pfattheicher, 2017). For instance, people were more likely to cheat in order to avoid a negative status change, more so than to realise a positive status change (Pettit et al., 2016). Similarly, when standing to lose a dollar for every anagram solved, people were more likely to inflate their performance compared to those who could earn a dollar for every anagram solved (Cameron & Monin, 2008).

Individuals who lack power are constrained, exposed to more challenges, and typically have fewer resources at their disposal. It has been argued that lacking power triggers avoidance motivation, which is responsive to negative environmental cues. The powerless experience increased sensitivity to threats and punishment, negative affect, and behavioural inhibition, all of which are associated with loss aversion (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Keltner

et al., 2003; but see Inesi, 2010[1]). As such, the powerless should be motivated to achieve their goals in a loss frame, as loss frames better fit the goals that they encounter.

One question that arises is how the powerful respond in the face of potential losses. It has been observed that power can reduce the anticipated and felt threat of an unknown outcome, thereby decreasing the weight given to potential losses (Inesi, 2010). This follows research associating sensitivity to threats with reduced power, and not increased power (Keltner et al., 2003). This suggests that the powerful may not be typically loss averse. However, loss aversion among the powerful has often been documented, in particular, in the face of objective or subjective threats (Deng et al., 2018; see also Bugental, 2010). CEOs often make conservative decisions when faced with organizational change (inertia, Ryan, 2016; status quo, Maner et al., 2007). Experimental research showed that power does not reduce avoidance motivation, a motivational state conducive of loss aversion, even though it increases approach motivation (Smith & Bargh, 2008). Therefore, when important losses are salient, the powerful may be just as motivated to avoid losses as the powerless.

In the presence of such mixed evidence, the situated focus theory of power (Guinote, 2007) has called for an examination of effects of power in context. Power can activate a part of self-knowledge that is relevant to the situation in a flexible manner (Guinote & Chen, 2017), energizing individuals towards desired end states. As such, power holders possess the flexibility to deploy strategies that are relevant to their active goals (e.g., social attention, Overbeck & Park, 2006). In the present context, we argue that although the pursuit of gains may be typically accessible for the powerful (Keltner et al., 2003), avoidance of losses could become accessible when power holders are immersed in environments that points to losses in significant domains. For example, bank executives who had experience of financial crises

[1] Inesi did not observe an increase in loss aversion among the powerless compared to control condition (2010).

were better able to detect signals of other crises, and were more risk averse compared to executives who did not have such experience (Ahmed et al., 2019).

It is crucial to point out that cheating is motivated behavior, as it entails the intentional violation of pre-set rules in order to attain goals (Murdock et al., 2001; Van Yperen et al., 2011). The situated focus theory of power posits that the powerful are unequivocally guided by their salient goals (Guinote, 2008). Consequently, the powerful would cheat when provided with such an opportunity, if cheating assists their salient goal pursuit. Hence we argue that the powerful would be as loss averse as the powerless in protecting against losses (Table 1).

To summarize, the powerful can be characterized as responding to their active goals (e.g., maximizing time) by tapping into context relevant constructs: avoiding losses or attaining gains. Because powerful individuals have greater control over resources and exposure to opportunities than individuals who lack power, they may frequently find themselves striving for gains. Nevertheless, losses may be equally salient in some contexts. Consequently, the powerful may display loss aversion in these contexts in a similar way as the powerless. It is important to distinguish processes related to sensitivity to gains and losses and base rates of experiences encountered by powerful and powerless individuals in ecological settings.

Table 1

Interactive Effects of Power and Frame on Goal Accessibility and Cheating Behavior

	Powerful	Powerless

Gain	Accessible goal, situationally responsive	> Powerful cheat more than the powerless	Inaccessible goal, not situationally responsive
Loss	Accessible goal, situationally responsive	= No difference in cheating levels	Accessible goal, situationally responsive

The Present Study

One study sought initial evidence for the interactive effects of power and salient frames (gains vs. losses) on cheating. Following our argument, whether power triggers disproportionate cheating compared to the powerless should depend on framing. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that the powerful will cheat more than the powerless when gains are salient, but not when losses are salient. This would occur because the powerful are more motivated than the powerless to attain gains. No such differences would occur when losses are salient, because the powerful and the powerless should be equally motivated to avoid losses, when potential losses are salient.

A valued goal of having time was manipulated as gains or losses. Time is a finite resource with universal value (Schwartz, 1974). Participants were recruited separately based on their actual work positions (powerful, powerless). All participants were provided with the opportunity to cheat, whereby half of the participants were randomly assigned to the gain frame (to cheat in order to save time), and the other half were assigned to the loss frame (to cheat in order to avoid spending extra time). In addition, demographic variables potentially associated with naturally occurring power positions were assessed to control for their influence.

Method

Participants

Four hundred and seventeen U.K. based working adults completed the study through an online platform (www.prolific.ac) in return for monetary compensation. The sample size was pre-determined using power analysis, assuming (1 – Type 2 probability) = .90, $\alpha = .05$, and effect size $f = .20$, which resulted in a target of 70 participants per condition in this 2 (Power: High, Low) ×2 (Frame: Gain, Loss) between-subjects study[2]. This study was not pre-registered[3].

We initially recruited participants through two separate links, based on their answers to a standard pre-screening question related to participants' hierarchical position. All participants had answered a set list of pre-screening questions at the time of joining the online platform. Employed individuals who had responded "yes" to: *"*At work, do you have any supervisory responsibilities? In other words, do you have the authority to give instructions to subordinates?" were eligible to participate in the powerful condition study. Those who had answered "no" to the same pre-screening question were eligible to take part in the powerless condition study.

As participants' work position may have changed since they completed the pre-screening (obtained at time of joining the recruitment platform), they were asked the same question again at the beginning of the study. Only participants whose up-to-date work position fitted the study condition (powerful, powerless) were included for data analyses. For this reason, 86 participants were excluded. A further ten participants were excluded for correctly guessing the study's aims. As such, we report data from the remaining 321 participants (118 male; $M_{age} = 38.67$ years, $SD = 10.603$). Participants were randomly

[2] 20.9% (n = 67) of the participants were in the powerful & gain condition, 24.6% (n = 79) in the powerful & loss condition, 26.5% (n= 85) in the powerless & gain condition, and 28.0% (n = 90) in the powerless & loss condition. The irregular cell sizes mostly stem from participants being excluded from the powerful condition, for no longer having supervisory responsibilities.
[3] The reported study is the only study carried out within this line of research.

assigned to gain or loss frames. A majority of participants identified themselves as Caucasian (90.3%), and spoke English as their first language (91.6%). 65.4% of participants had an undergraduate degree or higher.

Procedures

Upon being assessed for their power position at work, participants took part in an ostensibly unrelated study on executive's problem solving skills. They were presented with spatial puzzles (Pulfrey & Butera, 2013). Half of the participants were told of the benefits of succeeding in solving the puzzles (gain frame), and the rest were told of the consequences of failing to solve the puzzles (loss frame). Unknown to participants, the objective of either condition could only be met through cheating. Participants reported their performance after four minutes. They provided demographic information before giving feedback on their study experience. Finally, participants were checked for suspicion, received a detailed debrief, and gave final consent.

Measures

Power. In order to remind participants of their actual power or powerlessness at work, participants were asked to give examples of exercising their power (powerful condition), or another person's power being exercised on them (powerless condition). In order to verify participants' power level between power conditions, additional information concerning participants' work position was collected. Firstly, participants indicated their relative position in an organigram. (1: *top* to 7: *bottom of the organization*). Next, they reported on 7-point Likert scales the degree to which they felt powerful at work (2-item $\alpha = .76$, supplemental materials). The two measures were correlated $r(321) = -.546$, $p < .001$[4]. As expected, the participants in the powerful study located themselves higher in the organigram, compared to

[4] Negative correlation refers to those feeling powerful being higher up the organigram.

those in the powerless study (M_{Power} = 3.56, SD_{Power} = 1.318, $M_{Powerless}$ = 5.07, $SD_{Powerless}$ = 1.348, $t(319) = -10.114$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.133$). The powerful participants also felt more powerful at work (M_{Power} = 5.33, SD_{Power} = 1.082, $M_{Powerless}$ = 3.70, $SD_{Powerless}$ = 1.285, $t(319) = 12.133$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.372$).

Gaining or Losing Time. Participants were given four minutes to solve six puzzles. Only three were solvable, but participants were not made aware of this (Pulfrey & Butera, 2013). To manipulate frame, half of the participants (gain frame) were informed that they would partake in two tests. If they succeed in solving four or more puzzles in test 1, they could skip test 2 that would take 11 minutes and finish early. The other half (loss frame) were told they would partake in one test. If they failed to solve four or more puzzles, they would be required to take an additional test that would take 11 minutes (Flynn et al., 1987). In fact, the 11 minute test did not exist. It was a cover story to motivate participants to cheat, by claiming they solved four or more puzzles (supplemental materials). When their time was up, participants reported how many puzzles they solved. Participants could over-inflate their scores to gain time or to avoid losing time. This paradigm provides a dichotomous measure of cheating, whereby those who claim to have solved four or more puzzles are classified as having cheated, and the remaining, as honest.

Control Variables. As power naturally occurred, we controlled for demographic variables that may differ across the powerful and powerless occupational groups, which were age, gender, and education level.

Results

Out of 321 participants, 146 (45.5%) of participants completed the powerful condition study, while the rest (n = 175, 54.5%) completed the powerless condition study. Participants in the powerful condition were more likely to be male $\chi^2(1) = 6.938$, $p = .008$, and received

higher education $t(319) = 2.681$, $p = .008$. There was no difference in age $t(319) = 1.213$, $p = .226$.

Between participants assigned to the gain frame (n = 152) and those assigned to the loss frame (n = 169), there were no significant group differences in any of the demographic variables, or work power. Thus random assignment was deemed effective.

Cheating

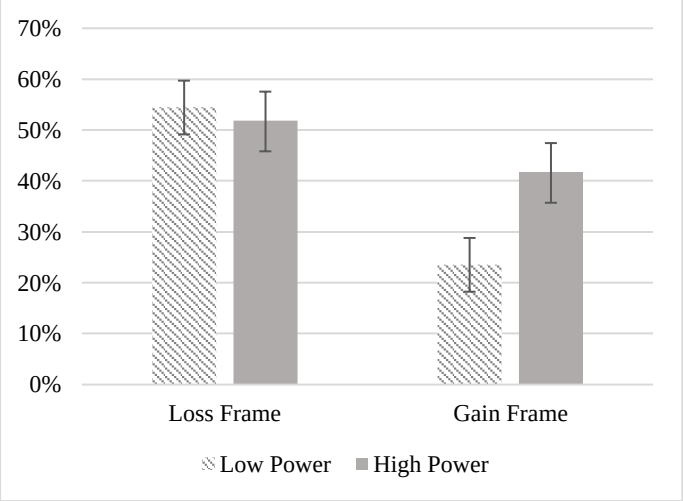
One hundred and eighty-three participants (57.0%) were classified as honest. A stepwise multiple binary logistic regression was used to test our hypotheses. Step 1 included power as input, and cheating as the dependent variable, with control variables age, gender, and education. The predictor variable frame was added in step 2, and the key interaction term power × frame in step 3. Step 1 was significant $\chi^2(4) = 12.534$, $p = .014$, showing that the powerful were more likely to cheat ($B = .248$, *Wald* = 4.336, $p = .037$), controlling for education ($B = -.260$, *Wald* = 4.691, $p = .030$), age ($B = -.021$, $p = .060$), and gender ($B = -.200$, $p = .101$). Adding frame in step 2 yielded a significant improvement to the model $\chi^2(5) = 29.015$, $p < .001$. Participants were more likely to cheat under loss frame, compared to those under gain frame ($B = -.479$, *Wald* = 15.890, $p < .001$). Power continued to predict likelihood of cheating ($B = .254$, *Wald* = 4.261, $p = .039$), demonstrating main effects of both frame and power. Crucially, step 3 improved the model fit even further $\chi^2(6) = 33.826$, $p < .001$. The interaction variable power × frame significantly predicted cheating ($B = .263$, *Wald* = 4.757, $p = .029$, Figure 1). Effects of power ($B = .291$, *Wald* = 5.423, $p = .020$) and frame ($B = -.470$, *Wald* = 14.995, $p < .001$) remained[5].

[5] The same binary logistic regression, but without control variables (age, gender, and education) was overall significant $\chi(3) = 21.395$, $p < .001$. The interaction variable power × frame ($B = .237$, $p = .044$) and frame ($B = -.441$, $p < .001$) affected cheating. Power ($B = .186$, $p = .114$) did not.

The interaction showed that differences in cheating between the powerful and the powerless only occurred under the gains frame $\chi^2(4) = 11.938$, $p = .018$, with the powerful cheating more than the powerless ($B = .574$, $p = .003$). Under loss frame $\chi^2(4) = 8.808$, $p = .066$, cheating levels did not differ between power levels ($B = .028$, $p = .862$). This result suggests that the powerful are only disproportionately more dishonest than the powerless when decisions are framed as gains.

Figure 1

Cheating by Power and Frame



Note. Percentage of participants who cheated. Under gain frame, powerful participants were more likely to cheat compared to powerless participants. No such differences were detected under loss frame (further analysis in supplemental materials).

Discussion

We hypothesized that the powerful would demonstrate disproportionate levels of cheating compared to the powerless when gains were salient, but not when losses were salient. We conducted a study to gather initial evidence for our reasoning. The findings

supported our hypothesis. Participants who had power at work were more dishonest in a gains frame compared to participants who lacked power. However, across power levels participants cheated equally to avoid a loss penalty. This suggests that powerful and powerless participants were equally motivated to avoid losses. This result is consistent with our proposal that when losses are salient under a loss frame, powerful and powerless people can demonstrate a similar ethical conduct. Furthermore, the powerful were context savvy in their goal pursuit (Guinote, 2007), and flexibly protected their goal of maximizing time, also under a gains frame. The findings highlight the role of goal accessibility. Even though the powerful orient towards rewards and opportunities, as the approach-inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003) proposes, they can also respond to the threat of loss, when such threat is accessible. These findings are consistent with the situated focus theory of power (Guinote, 2007).

This study has some limitations. Although an interaction of power and frame was observed as hypothesized, the study did not explicitly examine processes underlying the responses of powerful and powerless individuals, such as goal accessibility. That is, we do not have a demonstration of mechanisms to untangle whether the heightened cheating of the powerful under gain frame (compared to the powerless) is due to their chronic gain focus (Keltner et al., 2003; but see Inesi, 2010), their flexible goal pursuit (Guinote, 2007), or both. Unpicking the mechanisms will allow for a deeper understanding of power and gain goals.

In a similar vein, we cannot yet definitively conclude that under loss frame, the powerful and powerless cheat for different reasons (powerful: temporarily accessible construct, powerless: chronically accessible construct). It is possible that the powerful experience reduced threat associated with a loss (Inesi, 2010), but nevertheless are motivated and cheat in order to avoid the loss of time. The study is a demonstration of our argument,

however further research is necessary to replicate the present study and examine mechanisms underlying the motivation to cheat.

The present research contributes to the understanding of the effects of power in negative domains, which have been under-examined. It adds to an emerging literature on the effects of threats on power holders (Deng et al., 2018). For example, when the powerful lack legitimacy (a threat to power), they diverge from stereotypical power moves (Hays & Goldstein, 2015; Lammers et al., 2008; Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2000). Similarly, power instability (Sligte et al., 2011) and feelings of inadequacy stemming from incompetence (Fast & Chen, 2009) are meaningful threats to power. In addition, the present work contributes to the understanding of lack of power. Considerably little is known about the ethical conduct of the powerless. Prior research has shown that when power is unstable, the powerless can be cognitively flexible and less avoidant compared to when power is stable (Jordan et al., 2011; Sligte et al., 2011). This suggests that when power is unstable, the powerless may decrease their loss aversion and related unethical behavior. We focused on time as the valuable resource, and examining other commodities would be an interesting avenue for future research.

It is noteworthy that present research was carried in natural settings based on actual power relations. This speaks to their ecological validity. However, because power was not randomly assigned, the effect of power on cheating remain correlational, even though we controlled for basic individual differences (education, age and gender). It is possible that other factors that co-vary with power contributed to the effects obtained. Thus power should be experimentally manipulated in future research that is ideally pre-registered, in order to strengthen and validate the claims made in the present study. Despite its limitations, the present conceptual proposal highlights the importance of situational boundaries to the effects of power on corruption.

Note. The data that support the findings of the study are available at: https://osf.io/3wv7t/?view_only=56b87d450f52435881308380052b453d

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