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Power and retributive justice: How trait information influences the fairness of punishment among power holders

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Four studies tested the effects of power on retributive justice judgments.
- High power people are more punitive towards offenders with evil character traits.
- These effects emerge only if the power position was acquired legitimately.
- When no trait information was given, the effects of power were mediated by appraisal ratings.
- Power holders base punitive judgments more on information or assumptions of negative traits.

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ABSTRACT

In four studies, we investigated the effects of power on retributive justice judgments (i.e., the severity of punishment that people consider being fair). In Study 1, results revealed that participants who were primed with high power recommended more severe punishment than participants who were primed with low power, but only when the offender possessed negative character traits. In Study 2, these effects were replicated in an applied setting. In Study 3, we found that the inclination of power holders to base retributive justice judgments on negative traits only materialized when the power position was acquired legitimately. In Study 4, no trait information was given. Power again increased punishment, and this effect was mediated by trait appraisal ratings. It is concluded that legitimate power holders are more punitive due to their tendency to base retributive justice judgments on information or assumptions of negative traits that are stereotypically associated with offenders.

Introduction

In everyday life, punishment of offenders is typically carried out by power holders. Corporate managers decide whether to reprimand or fire a lazy and underperforming employee, teachers take disciplinary measures against cheating students, and judges or juries decide about guilt and sentencing of criminals. Punishment is even—implicitly or explicitly—part of common definitions of power, which is often conceptualized as control over other people's outcomes, including the rewards and punishments that they receive (Fiske, 1993; French & Raven, 1959; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Smith, 2013). These considerations suggest that power holders play an important role in establishing a sense of *retributive justice*, which pertains to the extent to which people believe that offenders received fair and appropriate punishment (Carlsmith, 2006; Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Hogan & Emler, 1981; Miller & Vidmar, 1981; Van Prooijen, 2006; Van Prooijen & Kerpershoek, 2013). Despite such an intrinsic connection between power and punishment, there is a paucity of research studying what the implications of power differences are for evaluations of retributive justice, in particular the severity of punishment that people consider being fair and appropriate.

Circumstantial evidence obtained from research in various social settings suggests that power holders tend to endorse more severe punishment than people who lack power. For instance, research indicates that power holders are more inclined to enforce decisions through punishment instead of persuasion in an organizational simulation (Kipnis, 1972). Furthermore, court juries with nullification instructions—which increase their power to disregard the law if they believe that strictly applying the law would lead to an unfair outcome—have been shown to punish offenders that are considered potentially dangerous more severely than juries without nullification instructions (Horowitz, 1985, 1988). Finally, evidence reveals that in organizations increased power is associated with more negative performance

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evaluations (Georgesen & Harris, 1998). Given the importance of performance evaluations for people's careers, one might interpret these findings as power holders being not only more critical of employees' performance, but also more punitive. Taken together, these findings provide preliminary support for the proposition that higher power is sometimes associated with more severe punishment of offenders, in both organizational and legal settings.

Recent social–psychological studies offer only indirect evidence for the possibility that power holders are more punitive than non-power holders. For instance, research reveals that whereas power leads people to become more permissive of their own actions, they hold others to a more stringent moral standard (Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010). Furthermore, power has been associated with increased approach motivation and goal-directed behavior (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Keltner et al., 2003; Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). Such approach motivation pertains not only to the pursuit of positive goals (e.g., rewards), but it also pertains to acting against undesirable aspects of the direct environment. This includes acting against impersonal objects—such as turning off an annoying fan while performing tasks (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003)—as well as against other persons, as for instance evidenced in findings that power is associated with increased aggression (Fast & Chen, 2009; Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001; see also Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995). These processes may suggest that power holders are also likely to be more punitive, given that people's first impulse after an offense involve predominantly punitive instead of reconciliatory goals (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Admittedly, these findings are suggestive at best for a relation between power and punishment, and direct empirical evidence establishing if, and under what specific conditions, power holders more strongly endorse punishment of offenders is currently lacking.

The present research is designed to fill this void by examining the effects of power on retributive justice judgments. The main proposition that we investigate in this study is that people who have high power consider severe punishments as fairer than people who have low power. Moreover, we argue that the main explanation for this phenomenon is that power holders are more likely to base their punitive judgments on information or assumptions of negative traits that are stereotypically associated with offenders. As such, the present research is designed to extend previous studies by (a) providing evidence if, and under what conditions, power holders endorse more severe punishment for offenders than people who have low power, and (b) extending insights into the psychological processes underlying punishment by integrating the retributive justice and social power research domains. In the following, we introduce our line of reasoning in more detail.

Power and negative traits of offenders

As with many social categories, people stereotypically associate offenders with various traits. For instance, research on demonizing suggests that people often ascribe “evil” character traits to offenders (Baumeister, 1997; Darley, 1992; Ellard, Miller, Baumle, & Olson, 2002). These traits are mentally integrated into a prototypical evilness scheme, that is, an interrelated set of negative traits that people expect offenders to possess (Van Prooijen & Van de Veer, 2010). Such a prototypical evilness scheme comprises, for instance, expectations that offenders lack uniquely human emotions (Leyens et al., 2000), are socially isolated (Baumeister, 1997), and have a reputation of immoral behavior that either holds no regard for other people's well-being, or is even aimed at intentionally hurting others (Berkowitz, 1999). But depending on the type of offense that was committed, people can also expect other, arguably less evil traits from offenders, such as laziness or carelessness in the case of offenses that were caused by negligence. Thus, people have stereotypical expectations of what traits offenders are likely to have, and descriptions of offenders can in various degrees be consistent or inconsistent with such expectations.

Research provides preliminary support for the assumption that such negative trait information influences punishment. In a study by Van Knippenberg, Dijksterhuis, and Vermeulen (1999), the authors investigated the impact of social categories that are versus are not stereotypically related to crime. Participants received information about an offender who was a bank employee (positive category offender) or about an offender who was a drug addict (negative category offender) and were asked to give judgments about guilt. Results revealed that, at least under conditions of cognitive load, individuals judge a negative category offender as guiltier than a positive category defendant. More generally, negative traits or social categories have frequently been associated with harsher punishment of offenders (Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985; Sweeney & Haney, 1992). In the present contribution, we propose that particularly power holders are likely to translate negative trait information into a preference for harsh punishment.

Our line of reasoning is rooted in theories on power and social cognition. A line of research that is particularly relevant for our purposes indicates that power holders stereotype others more than non-power holders (Fiske, 1993; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987; cf. Brauer & Bourhis, 2006), and pay more attention to stereotypic information, particularly when this information is negative Rodriguez-Bailon, Moya, and Yzerbyt (2000). Stereotyping among power holders occurs both by default and by design (Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000; Goodwin, Operario, & Fiske, 1998): Stereotyping by default pertains to low-level, relatively effortless processes that lead power holder to process information about social categories by relying on existing knowledge structures, hence paying attention to stereotype-consistent information and ignoring stereotype-inconsistent information. Stereotyping by design refers to the relatively more effortful process of motivated stereotype maintenance, which entails actively seeking confirmatory evidence for existing stereotypes. The relation between power and stereotyping converges with research revealing that power holders generally process social information more abstractly and heuristically than powerless individuals (Magee & Smith, 2013; Smith & Trope, 2006; Smith, Wigboldus, & Dijksterhuis, 2008), and suggests that particularly power holders are susceptible to stereotypic information when evaluating punishment for offenders.

The underlying process why such trait information may motivate a strong punitive preference among power holders can be found in social judgeability theory (Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994; cf. Croizet & Fiske, 2000; Goodwin et al., 2000): Power holders—due to the superior expertise, skills, or performance through which they acquired their power position—tend to experience a sense of entitlement to judge others, meaning that they have relatively more confidence in the correctness of their stereotypic beliefs and worldviews. Indeed, research reveals that power is generally associated with an increased confidence in one's beliefs (Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Beccera, 2007). This process suggests that power holders are more often prone to rely on existing knowledge structures—particularly in cases where trait information confirms and reinforces existing stereotypes—when evaluating what type of punishment is desirable for offenders. We propose that this greater reliance on stereotypically consistent trait information (i.e., “evil” trait information) exacerbates the extent to which power holder make attributions for the offense that implicate the offender, such as perceptions of blame, accountability, and malevolent intent, thus increasing the severity of punishment that is considered appropriate. Indeed, it stands to reason that the more one ascribes the offense to the offender's evil character traits, the more one considers the offender a liability for the future (or a possible repeat offender).

This inclination of power holders to base punitive judgments on trait information is less likely to emerge when the offender has traits that are inconsistent with common stereotypes about offenders (i.e., “non-evil” trait information). After all, such information violates the negative stereotypic expectations that people have of offenders, making it hard for perceivers—power holders and powerless individuals alike—to rely

on existing knowledge structures when evaluating retributive justice. As such, the inconsistency between the category ("offender") and the information given ("non-evil") instigates relatively effortful information processing in both people with high and low power. Correspondingly, research reveals that when confronted with traits that are inaccessible or unexpected, people with high and low power do not differ in how they evaluate a target person (Guinote, Weick, & Cai, 2012; see also Guinote, 2007). These considerations prompt the proposition that people with high power endorse more severe punishment than people with low power, unless an offender has traits that are inconsistent with stereotypical expectations of evilness.

Building on the above line of reasoning, in the present research we hypothesize that high power individuals consider more severe punishment as fair than low power individuals. Moreover, this effect is expected to occur because power holders are more strongly inclined to base their retributive justice judgments on information or assumptions of negative traits that one would stereotypically expect from an offender. In the following we report four studies that were designed to test this line of reasoning. In Study 1 we directly tested our hypothesis in a laboratory experiment in which we manipulate power, and whether or not the offender has evil or non-evil traits. In Study 2 we tested whether our ideas generalize to an organizational setting with actual power differences. In Study 3 we sought to extend these findings by gathering further evidence for the line of reasoning underlying our prediction. Notably, our reasoning is based on the process of social judgeability, that is, power holders' feelings of entitlement to judge others (Yzerbyt et al., 1994). In Study 3 we therefore created conditions where power holders are less likely to experience such a sense of entitlement, by manipulating the legitimacy of participants' power position (Lammers et al., 2010). In the introduction of Study 3 we illuminate the hypothesized role of power legitimacy in more detail. Finally, in Study 4 we examined if power influences retributive justice judgments when no trait information is available, and whether or not trait appraisals mediate that effect. We now first introduce Study 1.

Study 1

Study 1 was a laboratory experiment in which participants were primed with various levels of power. To do so, we adopted the procedure designed by Galinsky et al. (2003), which entail asking participants to write about either an event where they had power, or about an event in which they were powerless. Participants then read a scenario about a car salesman ("Mark") who deliberately sold a damaged car, causing severe injuries on the customer who bought the car (cf. Goldberg, Lerner, & Tetlock, 1999). To manipulate trait information, we provided participants with information that was either consistent or inconsistent with prototypical expectations of evilness (Van Prooijen & Van de Veer, 2010). In the evil condition, the car salesman was described as possessing a number of traits that are consistent with expectations of evilness, including being socially isolated, and having a history of immoral—though not necessarily criminal—behavior (Mark the trouble maker). In the non-evil condition, the car salesman was described as possessing a number of traits that are inconsistent with expectations of evilness, including having a family and a rich social life, without clues suggesting a history of immoral behavior (Mark the family man). We predicted that participants who were primed with high power would base their retributive justice judgments more strongly on such trait information than participants who were primed with low power.

Method

Participants and design

The hypothesis was tested in a 2 (power prime: low vs. high) × 2 (trait information: evil vs. non-evil) between-subjects factorial design. A total of 77 participants (45 women and 32 men), varying in age from 18 to 28 years, ($M = 22.14$, $SD = 2.87$), were approached in the student cafeterias of the VU University Amsterdam, and were requested to do the study, which had the format of a brief paper and pencil task, with the incentive for a candy bar.

Procedure

First, participants were primed with high or low power by means of a writing task (Galinsky et al., 2003): Participants in the low power condition were asked to write about an event in which someone else had power over them. In the high power condition, participants were asked to write about a particular time they had power over others. After the power manipulation, participants were asked to read and evaluate a scenario (cf. Goldberg et al., 1999). The scenario described the following situation:

In 2001, the forty-year old Mark van der Veer took over his dad's used car company. This car company is situated in Rotterdam. Mark's goal was to sell as many cars without damage as possible. One day, he did sell a damaged car. Mark knew about the defects of the car, but he still sold the car. Due to these defects, a customer had a car accident. This resulted in severe injuries and he needed a wheelchair for his transportation throughout the year.

In the evil condition, the following description was added:

Neighbors and employees find Mark a socially isolated person. He never got married. Neighbors are extremely annoyed by the antisocial behavior of Mark. For instance, he does not remove the garbage from his front door. Furthermore, during the night he is often repairing his car which causes a lot of nuisance. Finally, children often feel intimidated by Mark.

In the non-evil condition, the following description was added:

Friends and relatives see Mark as a quiet person and a real family man. He is married and has two children, a daughter of ten and a son of seven years old. Recently, he and his wife celebrated their 12.5 years of marriage. A lot of people were invited to this party and enjoyed it very much. The day before the accident, his employees told that they had a pleasant conversation with Mark. Mark was looking forward to the summer when he usually camps outside.

Following the scenario, participants answered the questions that constituted the dependent variables. To measure participant's retributive justice judgments, three questions were asked: "To what extent should Mark be punished?" (0 = *not punished,* 6 = *severely punished*), "What kind of punishment is fair for Mark?" (0 = *mild punishment,* 6 = *severe punishment*), "What is an appropriate punishment for Mark?"(0 = *mild punishment,* 6 = *severe punishment*). These three items were averaged into a reliable retributive justice scale ($\alpha = .85$). To check the trait information manipulation, participants responded on three dimensions to the question: "Imagine that you did not know that Mark had caused the accident; what would be your impression of Mark?" (0 = *negative*, 6 = *positive*); (0 = *unkind*, 6 = *kind*); and (0 = *unreliable*, 6 = *reliable*). These three items were averaged into a reliable target appraisal scale ($\alpha = .91$).

Results

Manipulation check

A 2 (power) × 2 (trait information) ANOVA on the target appraisal scale revealed a trait information main effect only, $F(1, 73) = 79.06$, $p < .001$; $\omega^2 = .50$. Participants in evil condition had a more negative impression of the offender ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.01$) than participants in the non-evil condition ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.95$). The main effect of power was nonsignificant, $F(1, 73) = 0.06$, $p = .81$, and the interaction was nonsignificant as well, $F(1, 73) = 1.74$, $p = .19$. These findings suggest that participants perceived the trait information manipulation as intended.

Retributive justice judgments

A 2 × 2 ANOVA on the retributive justice scale revealed main effects of both the power manipulation, $F(1, 73) = 7.31$, $p < .01$; $\omega^2 = .08$, and the trait information manipulation, $F(1, 73) = 5.12$, $p < .03$; $\omega^2 = .05$. Participants recommended more severe punishment if they were primed with high power ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.67$) than if they were primed with low power ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.81$). In addition, participants recommended more severe punishment following an evil ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.71$) as opposed to a non-evil description ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.80$).

More important was that these main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 73) = 4.66$, $p < .04$; $\omega^2 = .05$. The means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 1. The simple main effect of trait information on retributive justice judgments was significant among participants who were primed with high power, $F(1, 73) = 10.23$, $p < .01$; $\omega^2 = .11$, but not among participants who were primed with low power, $F(1, 73) = 0.00$, $p = .98$. Consistent with our line of reasoning, these findings indicate that people who are primed with high power base their punishment judgments on trait information more strongly than people who are primed with low power.

Furthermore, it can be noted here that the simple main effect of the power prime manipulation on retributive justice judgments was significant in the evil condition, $F(1, 73) = 12.31$, $p < .01$; $\omega^2 = .13$, but not in the non-evil condition, $F(1, 73) = 0.11$, $p = .74$. This latter finding supports the idea that participants primed with high power perceive more severe punishment as fair than participants primed with low power, but only for offenders with negative traits that are stereotypically consistent with the offense.

Finally, we compared the correlations of target appraisals with retributive justice judgments between power conditions. This correlation was significant among participants primed with high power, $r = -.53$, $p = .001$, and nonsignificant among participants primed with low power, $r = .02$, $p = .89$. The correlations differ significantly according to Fisher's r-to-z transformation, $z = -2.57$, $p = .01$. These findings further support the argument that people primed with high power base their retributive justice judgments more strongly on their stereotypic appraisals than people primed with low power.

Discussion

The findings of Study 1 supported our line of reasoning. Although promising, these results are limited to the psychological laboratory and to the specific population of university students. Although laboratory experiments are well-suited to investigate the causal influence of theoretical constructs on dependent variables while assuring high internal validity, one may question whether the processes observed in the laboratory generalize to situations outside of the laboratory and to different populations. To evaluate the generalizability of the present findings, we investigated whether evidence for the present conclusions could be observed outside of the psychological laboratory. Hence, we investigated the present hypothesis in an organization where we differentiated between actual power holders and subordinates.

Table 1
Means and standard deviations of retributive justice judgments as a function of power and trait information (Study 1).

	High power		Low power	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Evil traits	4.47	0.46	3.68	0.70
Non-evil traits	3.75	0.67	3.67	0.94

Note. Higher means indicate that more severe punishment is considered fair.

Study 2

Power holders and subordinates in an organization received a description of a target employee who either had positive traits (the target employee was described as hard-working and pleasantly sociable) or negative traits (the employee was described as not hard-working and socially isolated). Then, we assessed participants' retributive justice judgments in response to a number of integrity violations that was committed by this employee. Based on our line of reasoning, we predicted that trait information of the target employee would influence retributive justice judgments particularly among power holders.

Method

Participants and design

The study was conducted in an international profit organization operating at the energy market. This organization has employees working in both the UK and the Netherlands. We approached a total of 235 employees (180 UK and 55 NL) by means of an email in which we requested them to participate in an online questionnaire. A total of 71 employees (47 UK and 24 NL) eventually participated in the study.

The hypothesis was tested in a design in which we randomly assigned participants to conditions that varied whether the target person was described as having positive versus negative traits, and we measured power by asking participants whether they acted as supervisor for other employees in the organization. We dichotomously asked participants whether or not they had an executive function in the organization, and informed them that they could consider themselves as an executive if they supervised at least two employees. Results revealed that 21 participants could be classified as power holder and 50 participants as subordinate. The age for power holders varied from 27 to 52 years ($M = 41.67$, $SD = 8.97$), and for subordinates from 18 to 59 years ($M = 37.76$, $SD = 9.57$). This age difference was not significant, $F(1, 67) = 1.80$, $p = .18$.

Procedure

The questionnaire was presented as a study on integrity at work. Participants were asked to form an impression of an imaginary colleague named Peter Johnson, who was presented as a direct subordinate among power holders and as a close colleague among subordinates. We then manipulated trait information. In the positive traits condition, participants read a description of Peter Johnson being a good employee—both in terms of effort and the quality of work delivered—and a pleasantly sociable person. In the negative traits condition, participants read a description of Peter Johnson being a problematic employee—both in terms of effort and the quality of work delivered—and a socially isolated person. After this, participants rated appraisals of the target person by responding to items asking whether they believed Peter to be intelligent, bad (recoded), well-mannered, anti-social (recoded), reliable, polite, and a good person (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*). These seven items were averaged into a reliable target appraisal scale ($\alpha = .89$).

To measure retributive justice, we presented participants with two hypothetical scenarios in which Peter Johnson committed an integrity violation. The first integrity violation was described as follows:

Your employee/colleague Peter Johnson is a member of a sports club. It is his turn to do a presentation for new club members. With the company's approval, Peter borrows the projector from the office. When the presentation is over, the projector slips out of Peter's hands by accident. At home Peter tests the projector to see if it is still working, but unfortunately it is broken. Peter takes the projector to the shop to be repaired. He charges the cost to (the name of the company). Peter pretends this accident happened during working hours.

The second integrity violation was described as follows:

Your whole division works very hard to get a job done. The work load is huge. Everybody is asked to put extra effort into the job. Lately Peter has often reported in sick. You find out by accident that Peter regularly works in a bar in the evenings to earn a bit of extra money. It frequently happens that Peter does not feel well the next day and reports in sick.

After each integrity violation, participants answered the following three questions that were designed to assess their retributive justice judgments: "To what extent should Peter be punished?" (1 = *not punished*, 7 = *severely punished*), "What kind of punishment does Peter deserve?" (1 = *mild punishment*, 7 = *severe punishment*), and "What is a justified punishment?" (1 = *mild punishment*, 7 = *severe punishment*). Participants' responses to both integrity violations were then averaged into a composite and reliable 6-item retributive justice scale ($\alpha = .85$). After completing the study, participants were thanked for their participation.

Results

Appraisals

The effectiveness of the trait information manipulation was assessed with the target appraisal scale. Given the unequal cell sizes due to the fact that there were less power holders than subordinates in the sample, we first checked the homogeneity of variances with Levene's test on this measure. This test was not significant, $F(3, 63) = 2.06$, $p = .11$, indicating that the variances were equal across cells and that it was hence appropriate to interpret the ANOVA results. A 2 (power) × 2 (trait information) ANOVA revealed only a significant main effect of the trait information manipulation on participants' appraisals, $F(1,67) = 85.17$, $p < .001$; $\omega^2 = .54$. Participants in the positive traits condition rated Peter more positively on the appraisal scale ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 0.74$) than participants in the negative traits condition ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.65$). The main effect of power was nonsignificant, $F(1, 67) = 0.78$, $p = .38$, and the interaction was nonsignificant as well, $F(1, 67) = 0.90$, $p = .35$. These results indicate that the manipulation exerted the intended effects on participants' appraisals of the target person.

Retributive justice judgments

We also conducted a Levene's test on retributive justice judgments. This test was again not significant, $F(3, 63) = 1.57$, $p = .21$, confirming that the variances across cells were sufficiently equal to warrant ANOVA analyses. A 2 × 2 ANOVA on the retributive justice scale revealed main effects of both power, $F(1, 63) = 4.77$, $p < .03$; $\omega^2 = .05$, and the trait information manipulation, $F(1, 63) = 6.69$, $p < .01$; $\omega^2 = .07$. Power holders recommended more severe punishment ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.23$) compared to subordinates ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.30$), and participants who were informed that Peter had negative traits recommended more severe punishment ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.31$) than participants who read that Peter had positive traits ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.24$).

More important for our hypothesis was that these main effects were again qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 63) = 5.12$, $p < .03$; $\omega^2 = .05$. The means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 2. Simple main effect analyses revealed that the effect of the trait information manipulation was significant among power holders, $F(1, 63) = 5.78$, $p < .02$; $\omega^2 = .06$, but not among subordinates, $F(1, 63) = 0.00$, $p = .97$. As can be seen in Table 2, power holders perceived more severe punishment as fair after reading the negative as opposed to the positive trait description of Peter, but among subordinates, no such difference was found. These findings provide further support for our hypothesis.

Moreover, consistent with the findings of Study 1, power holders differed significantly from subordinates in their retributive justice judgments in the negative traits condition, $F(1, 63) = 3.87$, $p = .05$; $\omega^2 = .04$, but not in the positive traits condition, $F(1, 63) = 0.00$, $p = .99$. These findings again reveal that the difference between power holders and subordinates in retributive justice judgments emerges only when the offender has negative traits.

Table 2
Means and standard deviations of retributive justice judgments as a function of power and trait information (Study 2).

	High power		Low power	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Negative traits	5.10	0.67	3.59	1.26
Positive traits	3.45	1.07	3.48	1.40

Note. Higher means indicate that more severe punishment is considered fair.

Finally, we again calculated the correlations between target appraisal ratings and retributive justice judgments in both power conditions. This correlation was again significant among power holders, $r = -.72$, $p < .001$, and nonsignificant among subordinates, $r = -.26$, $p = .08$. These correlations differ significantly according to Fisher's r-to-z transformation, $z = -2.29$, $p = .02$. These findings further support the argument that power holders—more strongly than subordinates—tend to base their punitive judgments on their stereotypic appraisals.

Participants' gender

Given that in many organizations power holders are disproportionally male, we also investigated the potentially confounding influence of gender in our results. This was important given that the majority of power holders were indeed male in our sample (19 out of 21 power holders; 90%) whereas the gender distribution was relatively less skewed among subordinates (36 out of 50 subordinates were male; 72%). This gender distribution was significantly different between power holders versus subordinates, $\chi^2(1) = 3.95$, $p < .05$. However, when gender was included as a covariate in the main analysis, the crucial interaction between power and trait information on retributive justice judgments remained significant, $F(1, 62) = 4.94$, $p = .03$; $\omega^2 = .05$, whereas gender was a nonsignificant covariate, $F(1, 62) = 0.30$, $p = .59$. The findings reported here can thus not be attributed to participants' gender.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 provide support for the hypothesis in a sample of organizational power holders and subordinates. This suggests that the findings reported here are not artifacts of the experimental situation that we induced in Study 1, but instead are meaningful to explain differences between actual power holders and subordinates who evaluate integrity violations within their organization. Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 are consistent with the assertion that people with high power are more prone to base their retributive justice judgments on the offender's negative traits than people with low power. To further extend these findings, we conducted a third study in which we tested whether the relation between high power and retributive justice would be most pronounced when power was legitimate.

Study 3

Our proposed explanation for the described effects of power and negative trait information on retributive justice judgments is that power installs a sense of entitlement to judge others, which increases power holders' confidence to use their existing knowledge structures—such as stereotypes—in their evaluations (Briñol et al., 2007; Croizet & Fiske, 2000; Goodwin et al., 2000; Yzerbyt et al., 1994). These feelings of entitlement emerge as a function of the superior skills or expertise through which power holders acquired their position. Building on this line of reasoning, it can be inferred that the proposed effects of power

should not emerge when people acquired their power position illegitimately, such as through luck or nepotism. After all, if power is acquired through illegitimate means, there is little psychological basis for having increased faith in the correctness of one's worldviews, along with the corresponding feelings of entitlement to judge others. Following our logic, this is likely to have implications for how people evaluate offenders. Indeed, empirical research indicates that illegitimate power leads people consider infractions committed by others as more acceptable than infractions committed by themselves (Lammers et al., 2010). In Study 3 we manipulated the perceived legitimacy of a high power position to increase confidence in the theoretical line of reasoning underlying our predictions. It was expected that power holders would base their retributive justice judgments on negative trait information, but only when their power position was acquired legitimately.

In Study 3, participants completed a task and were informed that another participant completed the same task simultaneously. After that, participants were informed that, together with the other participant, they would play a dictator game (Handgraaf, Van Dijk, Vermunt, Wilke, & De Dreu, 2008; Van Dijk & Vermunt, 2000). In this economic game a distributor divides a number of valuable resources between self and a recipient, who can do nothing but accept the distributors' offer. Hence, the distributor (i.e., the dictator) has absolute control over the distribution of resources, and is thus high on power. All participants were assigned to the distributor's role, but we varied the legitimacy of this position through their task performance. Participants in the legitimate power holder condition were told that they performed better than the other on the task, and hence, would be in power to divide resources between self and other. Participants in the illegitimate power condition were told that they performed worse than the other on the task, but yet, they would be in power to divide resources between self and other. Participants then responded to the same scenario and manipulation of trait information as in Study 1.

Method

Participants and design

The hypothesis was tested in a 2 (power legitimacy: illegitimate vs. legitimate) × 2 (trait information: evil vs. non-evil) between-subjects factorial design. A total of 81 participants (56 women and 25 men), varying in age from 18 to 30 years ($M = 20.57$, $SD = 2.56$), were recruited from the student cafeterias of the VU University Amsterdam. Participants were paid 2.50 Euros for their participation.

Procedure

The experiment took place in a laboratory where participants were placed behind computers in separate cubicles. Participants were informed that either they or another participant would divide 50 lottery tickets between self and other. These tickets were part of a lottery among all participants of the experiment to win a cash prize of 100 Euros. To determine who would distribute the tickets, participants would first conduct a task. This task consisted of counting the numbers of squares with a unique pattern within a larger figure (for details, see Van den Bos, Wilke, Lind, & Vermunt, 1998; Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2004). After the participants correctly identified the number, a new figure was introduced. During 3 min, participants had to solve as many tasks as possible. After each solved task, the remaining time and the number of tasks completed were displayed.

At the end of the tasks, we manipulated power legitimacy. In the legitimate power condition, participants were told that they performed better than the other and therefore qualified to distribute the lottery tickets. They would hence be in charge of dividing the lottery tickets. In the illegitimate power condition, participants were told that they performed worse than the other. Although they hence did not qualify to distribute the lottery tickets, participants in this condition were informed that it was decided that they nevertheless would be in charge of dividing the lottery tickets.[1]

As a filler task, participants answered questions regarding their mood. The following items were solicited: "How angry do you feel?" (recoded), *(0 = not angry at all, 6 = very angry)*, "How satisfied do you feel?", *(0 = not satisfied at all, 6 = very satisfied)*, "How disappointed do you feel?" (recoded), *(0 = not disappointed at all, 6 = very disappointed)*, "How pleased do you feel?", *(0 = not pleased at all, 6 = very pleased)*. These four items were averaged into a reliable mood scale ($\alpha = .65$).

After this, participants were informed that, before distributing the lottery tickets, they would first read and evaluate a scenario. The scenario, describing an offense and including the trait information manipulation, was the same as in Study 1. Following the scenario, participants answered questions pertaining to the dependent variables. We first measured participants' retributive justice judgments with the same three items as in Study 1. These three items were again averaged into a reliable retributive justice scale ($\alpha = .87$). Furthermore, we checked the trait information manipulation by evaluating the offender on four dimensions: (0 = *indecent*, 6 = *decent*); (0 = *undeveloped*, 6 = *educated*); (0 = *unreliable*, 6 = *reliable*); and (0 = *cruel*, 6 = *mild*). These four items were averaged into a reliable target appraisal scale ($\alpha = .83$).

Following the scenario we informed participants that they would now distribute the lottery tickets. Before doing so we first checked the effectiveness of the power legitimacy manipulation by means of the following items: "Given your performance on the task, to what extent do you think it is appropriate that you have control over the division of the lottery tickets?" (0 = *very inappropriate*, 6 = *very appropriate*), "Given your performance on the task, to what extent do you think it is fair that you have control over the division of the lottery tickets?" (0 = *very unfair*, 6 = *very fair*), "Given your performance, to what extent do you think it is justified that you have control over the division of the lottery tickets?", *(0 = not at all justified, 6 = very justified)*. These three items were averaged into a power legitimacy check scale ($\alpha = .95$). We also asked how much power participants believed they had by asking the following two questions (0 = *a little*, 6 = *a lot*): "How much control do you have over the distribution of the lottery tickets?" and "Soon you will distribute the lottery tickets; How much power will you then have over the other?". These two items were averaged into a power scale ($\alpha = .64$). Participants were then asked to indicate how many of the 50 lottery tickets they decided to allocate to Other. After this, participants were informed that the experiment had ended. They were thanked, debriefed, and paid.

Results

The correlations between the variables measured in this study are displayed in Table 3. We analyzed the results with 2 (power legitimacy) × 2 (trait information) ANOVAs.

Manipulation checks

On the target appraisal scale we found a trait information main effect only, $F(1, 77) = 5.47$, $p < .03$; $\omega^2 = .05$. Participants in the evil condition had a more negative impression of the offender ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 0.81$) than participants in the non-evil condition ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.99$). Although the means were somewhat low also in the condition where the offender had non-evil traits—which is attributable to the fact that the target person was an offender also in this condition—the finding that participants had more positive appraisals in the non-evil condition

[1] We made sure not to provide participants with reasons why they were given high power despite their relatively poor performance. After all, providing such justifications may legitimize the situation (e.g., Folger & Martin, 1986).

Table 3
Correlations between variables (Study 3).

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Target appraisals	–					
2. Power legitimacy	.04	–				
3. Feelings of power	.00	−.12	–			
4. Lottery ticket distribution	.21	−.08	−.30**	–		
5. Retributive justice judgments	.51***	−.03	.09	−.16	–	
6. Mood	.04	.37**	.11	−.23*	.21	–

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

suggests that the trait information manipulation was successful. The effect of power legitimacy was not significant on this measure, $F(1, 77) = 0.36$, $p = .55$, and the interaction was not significant as well, $F(1, 77) = 3.51$, $p = .065$.

On the legitimacy check scale we found a main effect of power legitimacy only, $F(1, 77) = 81.37$, $p < .001$; $\omega^2 = .50$, such that in the legitimate condition participants experienced their power position as more legitimate ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.20$) than participants in the illegitimate condition ($M = 1.27$, $SD = 1.26$). The trait information main effect was not significant, $F(1, 77) = 1.89$, $p = .71$, as was the interaction, $F(1, 77) = 0.17$, $p = .68$. These results indicate that participants had perceived the manipulations as intended.

Feelings of power

On the power scale we found no significant main or interaction effects, Fs $(1, 77) < 1.15$, $ps > .28$ (overall $M = 5.17$, overall $SD = 1.06$). The high overall mean suggests that all participants felt very powerful. Importantly, these findings reveal that the legitimacy manipulation did not influence how powerful participants felt.

Lottery ticket distribution

We also analyzed how many of the 50 lottery tickets participants allocated to Other. We found no significant main or interaction effects, Fs $(1, 77) < 1$, $ps > .44$ (overall $M = 19.56$, overall $SD = 9.94$). These findings indicate that participants on average gave almost 20 tickets to other, and hence kept about 30 tickets for themselves. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that people tend to allocate about 40% of the resources to the other player in a dictator game (e.g., Handgraaf et al., 2008).

Retributive justice

A 2 × 2 ANOVA on the retributive justice scale did not reveal main effects of power legitimacy or trait information on retributive justice judgments, for power legitimacy: $F(1, 77) = 0.25$, $p = .62$, for trait information: $F(1, 77) = 0.16$, $p = .70$. More important was that the interaction was significant, $F(1, 77) = 6.03$, $p < .02$; $\omega^2 = .06$. Table 4 displays the means and standard deviations. The simple main effect of trait information was significant for legitimate power holders, $F(1, 77) = 4.08$, $p < .05$; $\omega^2 = .04$, but not for illegitimate power holders, $F(1, 77) = 2.13$, $p = .15$. As can be seen in Table 4, legitimate power holders recommended more severe punishment when the offender was described as evil as compared to when the offender was described as non-evil. These findings indicate that legitimate powerholders base their punishment judgments on negative trait information more strongly than illegitimate powerholders. At the same time, we note that retributive justice judgments were unexpectedly high in the illegitimate power/non-evil condition; in the discussion below we offer a tentative explanation for this.

Table 4
Means and standard deviations of retributive justice judgments as a function of power legitimacy and trait information (Study 3).

	Legitimate power		Illegitimate power	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Evil traits	4.21	0.76	3.79	0.99
Non-evil traits	3.60	0.91	4.23	1.12

Note. Higher means indicate that more severe punishment is considered fair.

It can further be noted that power legitimacy exerted a significant effect in the evil condition, $F(1, 77) = 4.45$, $p < .04$; $\omega^2 = .04$, but not in the non-evil condition, $F(1, 77) = 1.85$, $p = .18$. These findings are in further correspondence with our assertion that power legitimacy shapes punishment recommendations only for an offender who possesses negative traits.

Finally, in keeping with the previous studies, trait information and retributive justice judgments were strongly correlated among participants with legitimate power, $r = -.53$, $p < .001$. In this study, however, trait information and retributive justice judgments were strongly correlated among participants with illegitimate power as well, $r = -.51$, $p = .001$, and these correlations did not differ significantly from each other, $z = 0.12$, $p = .91$. Closer inspection reveals that illegitimate power holders perceived the offender in the non-evil condition equally negative ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 0.89$) as the offender in the evil condition ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.88$), according to the simple main effect of trait information on the target appraisal scale among illegitimate power holders. The effect of trait information on the target appraisal scale was significant among legitimate power holders (for the evil condition, $M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.73$; for the non-evil condition, $M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.03$). In the discussion below, we integrate these findings with our explanation of why the means on retributive justice judgments were relatively high in the illegitimate/nonevil condition.

Mood

Given that punishment is associated with affective processes (Carlsmith et al., 2002), we checked if the effects of power legitimacy on retributive justice judgments are attributable to variations in mood. A 2 x 2 ANOVA revealed a main effect of power legitimacy on mood, $F(1, 77) = 18.03$, $p < .001$; $\omega^2 = .17$. Legitimate powerholders ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 0.72$) felt better overall than illegitimate powerholders ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.79$). The main effect of trait information was nonsignificant on this measure, $F(1, 77) = 0.16$, $p = .69$, and the interaction was nonsignificant as well, $F(1, 77) = 3.19$, $p = .08$. Importantly, when mood was included as a covariate, the predicted interaction on retributive justice judgments remained significant, $F(1, 76) = 4.22$, $p < .05$; $\omega^2 = .04$. The results can thus not be explained by participants' mood.

Discussion

The results supported the hypothesis that legitimate power holders recommend more severe punishment for an offender with evil traits as compared to an offender with non-evil traits. This was not the case in the illegitimate power condition. One can infer from these findings that particularly people with legitimate power are influenced by trait information when forming judgments about retributive justice. These results are consistent with the findings of the previous studies, and support the assumption that power holders base punishment on negative trait information when their power is legitimate because only in these situations they have faith in the correctness of their stereotypic beliefs. In line with social judgeability theory (Yzerbyt et al., 1994), people are likely to develop an increased sense of entitlement to judge others only if they hold a power position that was acquired through legitimate means (Croizet & Fiske, 2000; Goodwin et al., 2000; Lammers et al., 2010), and hence, they base retributive justice judgments

on the extent to which trait information matches the stereotypical expectations that they have of offenders only if their power is legitimate.

An unexpected finding was that retributive justice judgments were also relatively high in the illegitimate power/non-evil condition (see Table 4). Moreover, this finding occurred despite the fact that target appraisals were equally strongly correlated with retributive justice judgments among legitimate and illegitimate power holders. One possible explanation for these findings is that people who have illegitimate power are anxiously concerned about protecting their relatively unstable power position (Lammers et al., 2008; Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2000). As a consequence, they may be more attentive towards others with non-evil traits—who generally are more realistic competitors for power than others with evil traits—and hence seize on the opportunity when this non-evil other commits an offense. Indeed, our findings on target appraisals are consistent with this interpretation: Illegitimate power holders perceived the offender in the non-evil condition equally negative as the offender in the evil condition, suggesting a motivation to downgrade the offender with non-evil traits. Moreover, previous research findings are largely consistent with our explanation, as people are particularly likely to assign demeaning tasks to others when they are high in power but are held in low esteem by others (Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012). Likewise, power holders are most aggressive when they feel incompetent (Fast & Chen, 2009). Thus, although tentative, our explanation of the findings among illegitimate power holders converges with other research findings. More important for the present purposes, however, is the finding that legitimate power holders desire more severe punishment than illegitimate power holders when confronted with an offender who has evil traits, a finding that is consistent with our line of reasoning.

Study 4

The fourth study was designed to extend the previous studies in three ways. First, a limitation of Studies 1 to 3 is that we did not induce a control condition in which participants received no trait information of the offender. As a consequence, it is unclear how trait information moderates the effects of power on punishment: Do the effects of power on retributive justice judgments only occur when people have explicit information about the offender's negative traits? Or do positive, stereotype-inconsistent traits disrupt the effects of power on retributive justice judgments? One way to find out would be to investigate the effects of power in the absence of explicit trait information. Such an approach also closely mimics most everyday life situations, where people form retributive justice judgments in response to offenders that they do not know personally (e.g., through the media), and without trait information. Our main prediction is that people with high power are also more likely to desire severe punishment for such unknown offenders than people with low power. In our studies we found the effects of power when participants had trait information that is consistent with stereotypical expectations of offenders. When such trait information is absent, it stands to reason that people *assume* these traits in them as a function of their stereotypical expectations. These assumptions of negative traits, then, are particularly likely among people high in power, as they are prone to stereotype others more than people with low power (Fiske, 1993; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987).

As a second extension, whereas in Studies 1 to 3 trait information was orthogonally manipulated—and hence trait appraisals could only serve as manipulation checks—Study 4 enabled us to test whether or not such trait appraisals would mediate the effects of power on punishment. Such a procedure—in which a series of studies combine a manipulation of trait information as moderator in one study, and a measure of trait appraisals as mediator in another study—may provide insight into the existence of a causal chain (e.g., Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Thus, in Study 4 we test the prediction that in the absence of trait information, the effects of power on retributive justice judgments are mediated by their appraisal ratings.

As a third extension, Studies 1 to 3 focused on trait information that is directly relevant for retributive justice reasoning as it may provide an indication of the morality of an offender's character. One may wonder, however, what the effects are of legally and morally irrelevant features that may nevertheless instigate stereotypical reasoning. Notably, ethnicity is a typical stereotype cue, and is predictive of punitive judgments under certain conditions (e.g., Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985; Sweeney & Haney, 1992). Moreover, research reveals that power increases people's tendency to form ethnic stereotypes, at least at the implicit level (Guinote, Willis, & Martelotta, 2010). Hence, in Study 4 we examined the role of offender's ethnicity in the effects of power on retributive justice, and compared (in a Dutch sample) retributive justice judgments in response to an offender with a typical Dutch name ("Alex") versus an offender with a typical Moroccan name ("Ahmed"; Note that Moroccans constitute the ethnic group that in the Netherlands is stereotypically most closely associated with crime; Gordijn, Koomen, & Stapel, 2001; see also Dotsch, Wigboldus, & Van Knippenberg, 2011; Van Prooijen & Coffeng, in press). We hence also tested the prediction that the effects of power on retributive justice judgments would be exacerbated if the offender had a Moroccan name as opposed to a Dutch name.

Method

Participants and design

The hypotheses were tested in a 2 (power: low vs. high) × 2 (offender's name: Ahmed vs. Alex) between-subjects factorial design. A total of 86 participants (54 women and 32 men), non-Islamic, varying in age from 17 to 35 years ($M = 20.76$, $SD = 3.19$), were recruited in the student cafeterias of VU University Amsterdam. Participants were paid 2.50 Euros for their participation.

Procedure

Upon arrival, participants were seated in individual cubicles. Participants were told that the study investigated participant's reactions to descriptions of social situations. As in Study 3, participants were informed that 50 lottery tickets were to be divided in this experiment between them and another participant. With these lottery tickets, they had a chance to win 100 Euros. After this introduction, we manipulated power by varying participants' role in a dictator game. In the high power condition, participants were assigned to the allocator role, and were informed that they would be in charge of dividing the lottery tickets between themselves and the other participant. In the low power condition, participants were assigned to the recipient role, and were informed that the other participant would be in charge of dividing the lottery tickets.

After the manipulation, participants responded to a short questionnaire about life activities as a filler task. Following the filler task, participants were asked to read and evaluate a scenario. The scenario contained the manipulation of the offender's name. The scenario described the following situation (cf. Goldberg et al., 1999; Van Prooijen & Coffeng, in press; manipulated information is in italics):

On a metropolitan intersection, a motorist collided with a driving empty car, which was parked earlier by a traffic warden. As a result of the accident, the motorist broke several bones and needed a wheelchair for his transportation throughout the year. The thirty-year-old traffic warden, *Alex van der Veer*/*Ahmed Gazah* from the city Enschede, has already worked a couple of years for the parking company. *Alex*/*Ahmed* was born (*in Marrakech*) and raised in Hengelo. Although *Alex*/*Ahmed* knew that the brakes were malfunctioning, he parked the car on a steep hill.

After reading the scenario, participants answered questions concerning the dependent variables. Participant's retributive justice

judgments were the main dependent variables and consisted of three items: "To what extent should the offender be punished?" (0 = *not punished*, 6 = *severely punished*), "What kind of sentence is fair for the offender?" (0 = *mild punishment*, 6 = *severe punishment*), and "What is a justified sentence for the offender?" (0 = *mild punishment*, 6 = *severe punishment*). These three items were averaged into a reliable retributive justice scale ($\alpha = .91$).

We then measured the appraisals that participants made by evaluating the offender on the following six trait dimensions: (0 = *Lazy*, 6 = *Energetic*), (0 = *Evil*, 6 = *Good*), (0 = *Impolite*, 6 = *Polite*), (0 = *Uneducated*, 6 = *Educated*), (0 = *Unreliable*, 6 = *Reliable*), (0 = *Cruel*, 6 = *Mild*). These six items were averaged into a reliable appraisal scale ($\alpha = .76$). Also, we assessed the extent to which participants made situational attributions for the offense by asking participants to what extent they believed situational circumstances in general contributed to the offense (0 = *not at all*, 6 = *very much*). In addition, we asked them about the extent to which the following more specific situational features contributed to the offense: "The offender's childhood"; "the offender's financial problems"; "personal problems"; and "divorce". These five items were averaged into a reliable scale of situational attributions ($\alpha = .77$).

To check the power manipulation, the following items were solicited: "To what extent do you have control over the division of the lottery tickets?", (0 = *no control*, 6 = *a lot of control*), "In a couple of minutes the tickets will be divided: "How much power do you have over the other?", (0 = *no power*, 6 = *a lot of power*),"How dependent are you on the other?" (recoded), (0 = *not dependent*, 6 = *very dependent*)." These three items were averaged into a power check scale ($\alpha = .80$). Furthermore, to check the offender's categorization, participants were asked to indicate dichotomously whether the offender was named Alex or Ahmed, and whether the offender was native Dutch or non-native. Finally, the participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid.

Results

Manipulation checks

On the power check scale, a 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed a main effect of power only, $F(1, 80) = 186.16$, $p < .001$; $\omega^2 = .68$. Participants in the power condition felt more powerful ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.08$) than participants in the powerless condition ($M = 0.94$, $SD = 1.42$). The main effect of offender's name was nonsignificant, $F(1, 80) = 0.95$, $p = .33$, and the interaction was nonsignificant as well, $F(1, 80) = 0.05$, $p = .82$.

On the dichotomous check of offender's name, only one participant gave an incorrect answer. This participant was included in the analyses (the results were similar when the participant was excluded). Furthermore, all participants correctly identified Ahmed as non-native and Alex as native Dutch. These results indicated that participants had perceived the manipulations as intended.

Situational attributions

We assessed situational attributions to test an alternative explanation of the effects of power on retributive justice: It could be that participants low in power are more inclined to make situational attributions for the offense (for instance because they might empathize or identify more with the offender, who is also low in power). However, a 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed no main or interaction effects on this measure, $Fs(1, 80) < 2.41$, $ps > .12$ (overall $M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.15$). The results reported here can thus not be explained by differences in situational attributions between participants high versus low in power.

Retributive justice judgments

A 2×2 ANOVA on the retributive justice scale revealed a main effect of power on punishment intentions, $F(1, 80) = 7.21$, $p < .01$; $\omega^2 = .07$. Participants recommended more severe punishment in the high power condition ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.78$) than in the low power condition ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.03$). The effect of offender's name was nonsignificant, $F(1, 80) = 0.76$, $p = .39$. Of importance was that the interaction was nonsignificant, indicating that power exerted the predicted effect on punishment intentions independent of the offender's name, $F(1, 80) = 0.06$, $p = .81$. These findings reveal that (1) the effects of power on punishment emerge also without explicit negative trait information, and (2) an irrelevant stereotype cue (i.e., ethnicity) does not moderate the effects of power on retributive justice. In the discussion below we address these findings.

Appraisals

Results revealed a main effect of power on the appraisal scale, $F(1, 80) = 5.15$, $p < .03$; $\omega^2 = .05$ Participants in the high power condition evaluated the offender more negatively ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.62$) than participants in the low power condition ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.73$). The main effect of the offender's name was nonsignificant, $F(1, 80) = 2.80$, $p < .10$; $\omega^2 = .02$, although there was a trend towards more negative appraisals for Ahmed ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.64$) than for Alex ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.73$). The interaction was nonsignificant, $F(1, 80) = 0.42$, $p = .52$. These results indicate that participants in the high power condition ascribed more negative traits to the offender than participants in the low power condition.

Mediational analysis

We then analyzed whether the appraisal ratings mediated the main effect of power on punishment. Regression analyses indicated that power predicts both retributive justice judgments ($B = 0.27$, $p < .01$), and trait appraisals ($B = -0.17$, $p < .03$). These results mirror the previously described ANOVA findings. Moreover, retributive justice judgments and appraisals were significantly correlated ($r = -.64$, $p < .001$). When retributive justice was regressed on both the power manipulation and the appraisal scale, the effect of power on retributive justice judgments was reduced to nonsignificance ($B = 0.13$, $p = .11$), whereas the appraisal scale still predicted retributive justice judgments ($B = -0.83$, $p < .001$). A bootstrapping analysis (5000 samples) showed a significant indirect effect, as indicated by the fact the 95% confidence interval excludes zero, $B = 0.14$, $CI_{95\%}$ [0.02; 0.31]. These results reveal that the stereotypic appraisals that participants ascribed to the offender mediated the effects of power on retributive justice.

Discussion

The findings in Study 4 extend Studies 1 to 3 in a number of ways. Specifically, these findings reveal that power also influences punishment when people have no relevant trait information about the offender. This facilitates the interpretation of the previous studies by suggesting that only explicit non-evil trait information attenuates the effects of power on retributive justice judgments (cf. Guinote et al., 2012). Furthermore, whereas the previous studies provided explicit information about the offender's traits, in the present study participants made their own inferences of the extent to which they believed the offender had evil or non-evil traits. Results revealed that these appraisals mediated the effects of power on punishment, which further supports the process that we assume. Apparently, when power holders have no explicit information about negative traits in offenders, they *assume* them to possess these traits, which drive their retributive justice judgments.

We found no evidence for effects of ethnicity on retributive justice judgments, or for a moderating role of ethnicity in the effects of power

on retributive justice judgments. To some extent this lack of ethnicity effects was surprising, given the plethora of studies that find racial bias in sentencing (e.g., Sweeney & Haney, 1992). At the same time, it has been noted that research findings on racial bias in sentencing are far from consistent (Taylor & Hosch, 2004; Van Prooijen, 2009). As such, the effects of ethnicity on punishment are conditional on various moderators, and it might be premature to fully discard the role of ethnicity in the effects of power on punishment. For instance, Bodenhausen and Wyer (1985) found that ethnicity influenced punishment particularly for offenses that were consistent with stereotypical expectations. The offense in our study may be classified as negligence, which might not be consistent with the stereotypes that Dutch people have about Moroccans (Dutch people associate Moroccans most stereotypically with theft; Gordijn et al., 2001). Nevertheless, a recent study did find an ethnicity effect in the context of a negligent offense, although consistent with the current study, this effect did not occur in the control condition (Van Prooijen & Coffeng, in press). These considerations underscore the complexity of the effects of ethnicity in retributive justice judgments, and suggest that there is ample opportunity for future research to explore if there are circumstances under which ethnicity moderates the effects of power on punishment.

General discussion

Taken together, the results of four studies support our line of reasoning. Study 1 reveals that participants who were primed with high power recommended more severe punishment for an offender that was described as having evil as opposed to non-evil traits, whereas participants who were primed with low power were not influenced by such trait information. In Study 2, these findings were replicated in an organizational setting among real power holders and subordinates, which supports the external validity of the present findings. Study 3 introduced legitimacy as moderator of the stronger punitive tendency among power holders. Results reveal that legitimate power holders recommend more severe punishment for an offender with evil traits than illegitimate power holders. This latter finding is consistent with the reasoning that only legitimate power holders have a sense of entitlement to judge others (cf. Goodwin et al., 2000; Lammers et al., 2010), leading them to translate information or assumptions about negative traits that are consistent with stereotypical expectations of offenders into punitive preferences. Finally, in Study 4 we investigated the effects of power when people have no direct trait information. Results again revealed the predicted effect of power on retributive justice judgments, and this effect was mediated by trait appraisal ratings. Moreover, this finding emerged independent of a morally irrelevant stereotype cue (i.e., ethnicity).

The present research sought to integrate theories on power with the psychology of retributive justice. The more specific contributions of the present studies for these two research domains are twofold. First, whereas previous research only offers circumstantial evidence to suggest that power holders endorse more severe punishment than powerless individuals (Galinsky et al., 2003; Keltner et al., 2003; Kipnis, 1972), the present research provides a direct empirical test of this causal effect. The finding that—under certain conditions—power holders consider more severe punishments as fair than powerless individuals hence extends these previous studies. Second, the present research offers insights into the underlying processes why power holders are more punitive by illuminating the role of stereotypical expectations of evilness that people have about offenders. Specifically, when trait information was provided (Studies 1–3), power holders were more likely to base their retributive justice judgments on the extent to which trait information matches expectations of evilness. The moderating role of legitimacy suggests that these effects are consistent with insights from social judgeability theory (Yzerbyt et al., 1994; cf. Croizet & Fiske, 2000; Goodwin et al., 2000), notably that legitimate power holders feel more entitled to judge others, thereby leading them to base their punitive preferences more on the extent to which offenders are consistent with their stereotypical expectations. Finally, when trait information was not provided (Study 4), power holders *assume* more evil traits in offenders, and these trait inferences subsequently drive their retributive justice judgments.

Strengths, limitations, and future research

A strength of the studies presented here is the variety of the methods used. That is, the proposed effects materialized both in our experimental laboratory and in a study conducted in an organization, suggesting that the causal relations that we observed in the lab have predictive value in the field. Moreover, we operationalized power in three different ways, notably through a validated priming procedure (Study 1; cf. Galinsky et al., 2003), by classifying employees of an organization into categories of actual power holders and subordinates (Study 2), and by means of a dictator game (Studies 3 and 4). The converging findings across studies reveal that the processes that we describe are not specific to the confines of one specific paradigm, but generalize to multiple operationalizations of power.

The conclusions that we draw apply only to retributive justice judgments, which may be conceived of as the punitive preferences that people have. Given that we did not measure behavior, the effects of power on the various punitive behaviors that people display in their daily life remains an open question. Importantly, future research designed to examine the effect of power on various sorts of punitive behaviors is likely to be challenging. In particular, there may be a natural confound in the relation between power and punitive behaviors: Being given the opportunity to punish someone else almost by definition installs one with a sense of power. After all, punitive behaviors enforce control over another person's outcomes, which is a common definition of power (Fiske, 1993; French & Raven, 1959; Keltner et al., 2003). High versus low power roles thus may be relatively hard to disentangle when one studies the effects of power on punitive behavior. Our focus on retributive justice judgments is not subject to this conceptual problem: High and low power individuals both are likely to have preferences about how severely an offender should be punished, and people are, independent of their power role, able to evaluate of how fair a given punishment is. Having said this, we do recognize the value of testing the effects of power on punitive behavior, and hence, we would like to stimulate researchers to come up with clever research set-ups that allow for a clean test of this possible relation.

The present studies consistently focused on transgressions that were somewhat moderate in severity, and we avoided the more severe transgressions (e.g., rape, murder). It was important to do so in order to avoid ceiling effects (cf. Van Prooijen, 2006; Van Prooijen & Lam, 2007). Indeed, research by Rucker, Polifroni, Tetlock, and Scott (2004) revealed that observers are more likely to take social factors into account when forming retributive justice judgments in the context of a moderate as opposed to a severe transgression. It stands to reason that stimulus materials conveying severe transgressions make it very hard to find relatively subtle effects of power differences on retributive justice judgments. A severe transgression may lead to extreme punishment intentions among both powerful and powerless individuals. Moreover, such extreme offenses may override positive trait information, as a rapist or murderer is likely to be considered an evil person regardless of additional trait information that is provided. These considerations suggest that the processes described here are particularly relevant to understand retributive justice judgments following moderate severity offenses. Having said that, it might be possible that in the case of severe offenses the phenomena described here are relevant for the psychological processes that lead people to assess a suspects' guilt or innocence, and testing that possibility is important for obvious practical and legal reasons.

Study 3 of this contribution was designed to illuminate the hypothesized underlying process by showing that only legitimate power holders are susceptible to trait information when evaluating offenders. In line with social judgeability theory, such legitimacy is frequently assumed to increase a sense of entitlement to judge others—that is, an increased confidence in the correctness of one's stereotypic beliefs (Yzerbyt et al., 1994). The results are supportive of this process by showing that only legitimate power holders, and not illegitimate power holders, based retributive judgments on trait information. Still, further evidence for this process could be obtained by assessing feelings of judgmental confidence directly. In the literature, however, there is ample support that legitimate power increases judgmental confidence in a variety of domains, including trait inference (Croizet & Fiske, 2000) and attitude change (Briñol et al., 2007). Taking these previous findings into account, and in conjunction with the effects of power legitimacy that we observed in Study 3, social judgeability theory provides the most plausible framework to account for our findings.

A possible limitation of the findings presented here is the theoretical observation that the link between power and stereotyping (e.g., Fiske, 1993) is not universal. Research indicates that, sometimes, power has the potential to promote more individuated impressions of others (Overbeck & Park, 2001; see also Magee & Smith, 2013). This finding is consistent with the more general notion that some of the pernicious consequences of social power are not universal, but instead are moderated by the extent to which power holders endorse communal goals or associate power with social responsibility (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Sassenberg, Ellemers, Scheepers, & Scholl, in press). At present, we can only speculate what the implications of these processes are for the dynamics described here. One might reason that people—power holders and subordinates alike—will not experience communal goals towards offenders very often. Moreover, people frequently experience a sense of responsibility towards their community, and the desire to protect one's community against an evil offender may only exacerbate punishment (Van Prooijen, 2009). But at the same time, making an objective and independent judgment of offenders can be considered part of being a socially responsible power holder. How these communal and social responsibility concerns impact the relation between power and retributive justice is hence an open question.

In everyday life, usually power holders are the people that ultimately decide in what way a person must be rewarded or punished (Fiske, 1993; French & Raven, 1959; Keltner et al., 2003). Ironically, our results suggest that particularly these power holders are likely to incorporate the extent to which trait information is consistent with their prior stereotypical beliefs in their punishment judgments. This may have substantial implications for the fairness of punitive decision-making in various spheres of social life, such as organizations, the legal system, or education settings. For instance, an interesting possibility that research may wish to consider is whether or not punitive decision-making decreases in accuracy to the extent that the decision-maker is more powerful. Such a prediction would follow from the basic conclusion of the present study, which is that power holders base punishment more strongly on their assumptions that offenders have negative traits. More generally, such decreased accuracy in punitive decision-making would also be consistent with research suggesting that power holders process social information more abstractly and heuristically—and hence, less deliberative or effortful (Magee & Smith, 2013; Smith & Trope, 2006).

At the same time, one might argue that power holder's inclination to use trait information in their punitive judgments does not necessarily lead to poor decision making in all possible situations. For instance, in Study 2 participants read about a “good” versus a “bad” employee committing integrity violations, and power holders carry direct responsibility for this employee. In such cases, it may sometimes be morally defensible or even desirable to be more forgiving towards the employee with the good reputation of being hard-working. Future research may thus consider in what situations these psychological processes improve or deteriorate decision-making in power holders. Relatedly, further research may focus on potential interventions that influence power holders' susceptibility for trait information specifically, or their inclination to reason heuristically more generally (e.g., the extent to which power holders are accountable to third parties; cf. Tetlock, 1992).

Concluding remarks

Social power is a fact and necessity of everyday life. Society needs power holders to coordinate groups into reaching collective goals. To facilitate such social coordination, rewarding or punishing individual group members are important instruments that power holders have at their disposal. But being in a high power role has substantial psychological consequences, and the very fact that power holders can punish others prompts the legitimate question of how, and based on what social information, power holders make their punitive decisions. The present studies were designed to contribute to these issues by examining the implications of power differences for retributive justice judgments, that is, the severity of punishment that people consider being fair. Results of four studies reveal that legitimate power holders often desire more severe punishment than powerless individuals, which is attributable to a greater tendency among power holders to rely on information or assumptions of negative traits when evaluating offenders. It is concluded that social power plays a prominent role in people's evaluations of retributive justice.

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