

Short Report

Powerful People Make Good Decisions Even When They Consciously Think

Pamela K. Smith, Ap Dijksterhuis, and Daniël H.J. Wigboldus

Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen

Having power means that one makes decisions that determine the outcomes of less powerful others (e.g., Deprét & Fiske, 1993). In fact, powerful people sometimes face multiple impactful, complicated decisions a day, with little room for error. How do they accomplish this? Recent research indicates that power changes not only a person's responsibilities, but also the way a person thinks. The powerful process information more abstractly—integrating information to extract the gist, detecting patterns and relationships—than the powerless (Smith & Trope, 2006).

Work on unconscious-thought theory (UTT; Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006) suggests that such abstract thinking leads to better decisions when the situation is complex. Individuals who think consciously are unable to consider all relevant attributes, due to consciousness' limited capacity. The piecemeal nature of conscious thought also leads them to weight these attributes suboptimally. In contrast, unconscious thought (i.e., thought when conscious attention is directed elsewhere) is more abstract, integrating information to form a summary judgment. Indeed, unconscious thought leads to better decisions than does conscious thought in complex situations (Dijksterhuis, Bos, Nordgren, & van Baaren, 2006).

Conscious thought impairs performance in part because it is piecemeal. If the powerful think more abstractly than the powerless by default, they should tend to think more abstractly even when thinking consciously. The powerful would then be spared the performance deficits accompanying conscious thought. This hypothesis moves beyond the debate of whether the powerful (Fiske, 1993) or the powerless (Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky, & van Dijk, 2008) are normally under greater attentional demands: High-power participants should perform equally well regardless

of whether they are consciously distracted, unlike low-power participants. We tested this hypothesis in an experiment using standard power priming and UTT paradigms. A follow-up experiment tested whether our results were due to different processing styles or merely different degrees of processing.

EXPERIMENT 1

Do high-power individuals make equally good decisions following conscious versus unconscious thought? Experiment 1 involved a 2 (power prime: low, high) \times 2 (thought condition: conscious, unconscious) between-subjects design. Eighty-one undergraduate students (57 female, 24 male; mean age = 21.48 years) wrote for 5 min about a time either when someone had power over them (low-power prime) or when they had power over someone else (high-power prime; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003).¹ A standard UTT paradigm followed (Dijksterhuis et al., 2006). Participants received information about four cars, each with 12 attributes, and were asked to form an impression of them. One car was the best (8 positive and 4 negative attributes), one was the worst (4 positive and 8 negative attributes), and the other two fell in between (6 positive and 6 negative attributes). Attributes were presented in random order, one at a time, for 4 s each.

After receiving this information, participants took part in one of two thought conditions. Participants in the conscious-thought condition were asked to think about their impression of the cars for 4 min. Participants in the unconscious-thought condition were distracted for 4 min with a word-search puzzle. Finally, all participants indicated how much they found each car to be a "good car" (0 = *not at all*, 20 = *very much so*).

Decision-making performance was assessed by subtracting participants' attitude toward the worst car from their attitude

Address correspondence to Pamela K. Smith, Department of Social Psychology, Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands, e-mail: p.smith@psych.ru.nl.

¹Manipulation checks confirmed that participants felt more in charge in the high-power stories than in the low-power stories in both experiments, $p_{\text{rep}} > .99$.

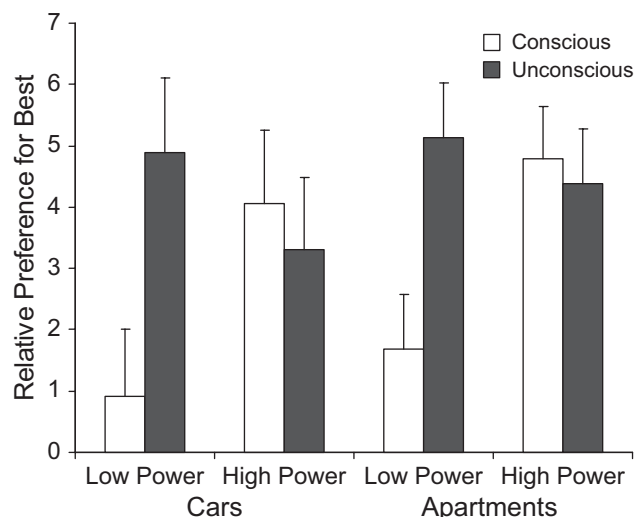


Fig. 1. Difference between attitude toward the best object and attitude toward the worst object as a function of whether participants had been primed with low or high power and whether they had thought consciously or unconsciously about the alternatives. Results are shown for Experiment 1 (cars) and Experiment 2 (apartments). Error bars represent 1 SEM.

toward the best car. Thought condition had different effects on performance for the two priming conditions, $F(1, 77) = 4.03$, $p_{\text{rep}} = .88$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$ (see Fig. 1). Low-power participants performed significantly better after unconscious thought than after conscious thought, $p_{\text{rep}} = .93$. High-power participants performed equally well in both thought conditions and did not differ from low-power participants in the unconscious thought-condition, $p_{\text{reps}} < .61$.

EXPERIMENT 2

In Experiment 2, we sought to replicate this effect and to test the alternative explanation that low-power participants simply put less effort into the decision task. One hundred sixty-five undergraduate students (107 female, 58 male; mean age = 21.81 years) completed a low-power or high-power priming task as in Experiment 1. Then they went through the same UTT paradigm, this time receiving information about three apartments, each with 10 attributes. One apartment was the best (7 positive and 3 negative attributes), one was the worst (3 positive and 7 negative attributes), and one fell in between (5 positive and 5 negative attributes). Next, participants took part in one of the two thought conditions as in Experiment 1. Afterwards, all participants indicated how much they liked each apartment (0 = *not at all*, 20 = *very much*) and rated how confident they were in their attitudes, how certain they were of their attitudes, how much effort they put into the decision task, and how motivated they were to do well on it (for all questions, 0 = *not at all*, 8 = *very much*). Finally, participants had 3 min to recall as many apartment attributes as they could.

Decision-making performance was assessed by subtracting participants' attitude toward the worst apartment from their attitude toward the best apartment. Thought condition again had different effects on performance for the two priming conditions, $F(1, 161) = 4.67$, $p_{\text{rep}} = .91$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$ (see Fig. 1). Low-power participants performed significantly better after unconscious thought than after conscious thought, $p_{\text{rep}} = .96$. High-power participants performed equally well in both thought conditions and did not differ from low-power participants in the unconscious-thought condition, $F_s < 1$. Furthermore, our manipulations did not significantly affect participants' confidence in and certainty of their attitudes, $p_{\text{reps}} < .70$, their reported effort or motivation, $p_{\text{reps}} < .84$, or the amount of apartment information they correctly recalled, $F_s < 1$. Differences in performance could not be attributed to depth of processing.

DISCUSSION

When given problems requiring a complex decision, high-power participants were equally good at identifying the better choice after conscious versus unconscious thought, whereas the performance of low-power participants suffered when they consciously deliberated. These results provide further evidence that conscious and unconscious thought differ in the type of processing that occurs. The powerful seem to be able to handle so many impactful decisions, without making excessive errors, in part because they generally think more abstractly.

REFERENCES

- Dépret, E., & Fiske, S.T. (1993). Social cognition and power: Some cognitive consequences of social structure as a source of control deprivation. In G. Weary, F. Gleicher, & K.L. Marsh (Eds.), *Control motivation and social cognition* (pp. 176–202). New York: Springer.
- Dijksterhuis, A., Bos, M.W., Nordgren, L.F., & van Baaren, R.B. (2006). On making the right choice: The deliberation-without-attention effect. *Science*, *311*, 1005–1007.
- Dijksterhuis, A., & Nordgren, L.F. (2006). A theory of unconscious thought. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *1*, 95–109.
- Fiske, S.T. (1993). Controlling other people: The impact of power on stereotyping. *American Psychologist*, *48*, 621–628.
- Galinsky, A.D., Gruenfeld, D.H., & Magee, J.C. (2003). From power to action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *85*, 453–466.
- Smith, P.K., Jostmann, N.B., Galinsky, A.D., & van Dijk, W.W. (2008). Lacking power impairs executive functions. *Psychological Science*, *19*, 441–447.
- Smith, P.K., & Trope, Y. (2006). You focus on the forest when you're in charge of the trees: Power priming and abstract information processing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*, 578–596.

(RECEIVED 4/29/08; REVISION ACCEPTED 6/20/08)

This document is a scanned copy of a printed document. No warranty is given about the accuracy of the copy. Users should refer to the original published version of the material.