

**Study Programme:** MSc Leadership and Organizational Psychology

**Title:** What effect does situational power have on the use of sarcastic irony, and what are the implications for leadership.

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## **1.0 Introduction to research topic**

### *1.1 Defining power*

In general, power can be thought of as control over others (Fiske, 1993) and we typically think of some people as having or not having power. However, it is more accurate to think of individual power as a continuum relative to the power of others. Hence, “power is a property of a social relation; it is not an attribute of the actor” (Emerson, 1962, p. 32).

More elaborate definitions of power vary according to the unit of analysis (e.g. individual, group, society), outcome of interest (e.g. organisational performance) and the guiding question (e.g. who has it or where is it located). Some definitions focus on the actor’s intentions whereas others focus on the target’s response (Keltner, Gruenfeldt & Anderson, 2003). Nevertheless, the prevailing definition of power is *the individual’s capacity to provide or withhold resources and administer punishment in order to alter the states of others* (Keltner, Gruenfeldt & Anderson, 2003; Fiske, 1993; French & Raven, 1959). These resources and punishments can be material or social (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). The power to control others thus resides in the control over things that the other party values. It may therefore make sense to think about the concept of dependence, and power as residing implicitly in others’ dependence - “the power of A over B is equal to, and based upon, the dependence of B upon A” (Emerson, 1962, p. 33).

Power is different from related concepts, such as status, authority and dominance. Status somewhat determines the allocation of resources but differs from power in that an individual can have power without status and status without power. Authority is formalised power in a formalised structure, but power can exist without this a formal structure. Dominance is behaviour that aims to achieve power, but power can be obtained without dominance (for instance the cooperative leader who obtains power through trust and cooperation). Therefore, status, authority and dominance are potential determinants of power (Keltner, Gruenfeldt & Anderson, 2003).

### *1.2 Power bases*

Power can be divided into five distinct types that describe the source of power and the actor’s relation to the recipient. It should be noted that power is rarely based on only one source and is rather a combination of several (Lippitt, Polansky &

Rosen, 1952; French & Raven, 1959). The five power types, or bases, are reward, coercive, legitimate, referent and expert power.

Reward power illustrates the actor's ability to distribute rewards to recipients and can be performed by increasing a positive factor or decreasing a negative factor. Sustaining this type of power is reliant on the reward being delivered as promised (Lippitt, Polansky, & Rosen, 1952).

Coercive power stems from the expectation that nonconformity to the actor's influence will result in punishment, and is similar to reward power as they both refer to an actor's ability to influence a recipient's wellbeing. The difference is that recipients respond differently when seeking to gain reward or relieve suffering than when trying to avoid punishment (French & Raven, 1959).

Legitimate power is based on internalised beliefs and values about the right to execute power over others and that recipients has an obligation to accept this influence. For example, older people have in some cultures legitimate power over younger people purely because of their age. Cultural values are a common source of legitimate power, and can be based on age, caste, gender, and physical characteristics. Social structure is another basis for legitimate power (French & Raven, 1959).

Referent power takes place when the person exposed to power wants to, or identifies him/herself with another person or group. The more someone want to be identified with something, the more referent power does the other part have. An example of this is illustrated by the fashion industry. By using desirable front figures, people often buy the product in order to identify with this person. In sum, referent power is based on identification (French & Raven, 1959).

Expert power is based on the perception that someone has a skill or expertise that others do not. The expert is seen as having knowledge in specific areas and thus are able to influence the recipient's cognitive structure. Exerting power outside the expertise area will reduce the expert power (French & Raven, 1959).

### *1.3 Personality and power*

Anderson and Brion (2014) review literature on power and concludes that there are several personality traits that predict who acquires power and who does not. People high on narcissism, trait dominance and self-monitoring were found to be more likely to see out power. This can be explained by behaviours associated with

these traits, such as seeking out social status, obtaining control over resources and social relations (Anderson & Brion, 2014). According to Anderson and Kilduff (2009) Individuals that are high on trait dominance may be defined by the fact that they work to obtain power and control in groups. However, one should be aware that such individual will not only use aggressive and negatively techniques (bullying and intimidation), they may also try to maintain their position by appearing helpful to the group's progress. The study conducted by Anderson and Kilduff (2009) indicates that dominant individuals gained influence over groups because they were perceived as competent by their peers. However, the reason they achieved levels of influence over others was not due to their confidence, but due to them acting in ways that caused them to be perceived as competent. In general, their findings suggest that the personality trait dominance can distort how abilities are perceived and make it difficult to detect who is competent and not. Furthermore, Lord, De Vader and Alliger (1986) found that the personality trait dominance is significantly related to how we perceive leaders, even more than intelligence and masculinity-femininity.

Having a personal sense of power, i.e. merely perceiving that you have the ability to influence others, are linked to a range of personality constructs. Anderson, John and Keltner (2012) found that locus of control, narcissism, self-esteem, extraversion, conscientiousness and openness to experience are positively related to personal sense of power whereas neuroticism and machiavellianism are negatively related. In line with Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson (2003), behavioural activation was also found to relate to power and behavioural inhibition were negatively related. The importance of identifying the relation between individual personality constructs and power is that this will influence the discussion of how individuals might react when primed with power. Anderson et al (2012) also find that a personal sense of power is consistent across social contexts and relationships, hence the perception of power within oneself can be distinguished as a stable feature of an individual.

Central to the discussion is dominance, which can be thought of as a personality trait described as “the capacity to exercise coercive power” (Chapais, 2015, p. 163). Dominance evolved as a way of attaining status in society, which granted access to various types of advantages, one of them being power (Chapais, 2015). It is a fairly stable personality construct that can predict whether an individual perceives themselves as having power or not (Anderson et al, 2012).

Dominance has been shown to be a persistent personality trait across situations, and involve behaviour such as speaking firmly, expressing opinions, taking the lead and asking others to do things (Moskowitz, 1994).

Martinsen & Glasø (2014) argues that a personality profile can be predictive of who becomes a leader and how effective the given person will be able to lead. In their study they found results that supported the findings of Judge, Bono, Ilies & Gerhardt (2002) which illuminates what the dispositional basis for leadership is. Judge et al., (2002) results suggests that the personality trait Extraversion appeared to be the most consistent and was strongly related to leader emergence across study settings and leadership criteria. Secondly, conscientiousness and openness to new experience also showed strong correlations of leadership. Additionally, the authors also note that the big five traits predict leader emergence better than leader effectiveness.

#### *1.4 The corruptive effects of power*

The academic literature and popular media is abundant with examples of how power corrupts, for example, using power to profit for themselves or violating social norms. It may seem that individuals who are bestowed with power become less sensitive to the psychological cost of misusing their power, even if they initially are honest individuals (Bendahan, Zehnder, Pralong & Antonakis, 2015). A famous study by Haney, Banks and Zimbardo (1973) looks into how power impacts individuals who experience or obtain power. It was a simulation study where students at Stanford University were recruited for participation after extensive testing. The aim was to gain insight to interpersonal dynamics in a prison environment. They found out that those who played the guards experienced increased social power, status and group identification. Additionally, one third of the guards showed more aggressive and dehumanizing behaviours towards their prisoners, than what was expected in this type of experiment. This contributed to notion that power has the ability to change the behaviour of those who obtain it, or find themselves in a position of power.

A study by Nell and Strumpfer (1978) found that power is related to drinking in terms of frequency, quantity and early starting age. Additionally, they found that power correlated significantly with the disinhibition factor. The disinhibition factor is termed the “swinger factor” by Zuckerman (1971) as it

consists of items that shows the loss of inhibitions; heavy drinking, a variety in sexual partners, “wild parties” and gambling.

Galinsky, Magee, Inesi & Gruenfeld (2006) experiments suggests that power reduces our ability to comprehend how others see, think and feel about the world. When primed with power individual were less likely to adopt another person's perspective. Thereby making them less capable of detecting and predicting the emotional states of others. They believe that ignoring others' perspectives is not a conscious decision, only that power makes perspective taking less likely. When comparing high and low power individuals, high power individuals focused less on others' psychological experiences, effectively reducing their empathy. Leaders who have a subjective experience of power have the possibility of increasing the tendency to verbally dominate social interactions. This can be explained by the effect subjective power have on increasing talking, which in turn decreases subordinates' perception of how open the leader is to other's input, which finally can deteriorate subordinate performance (Tost, Gino & Larrick, 2013).

Across five studies it is suggested that power corrupted how individuals in power evaluated kind acts of others. I.e it is suggested that favors done by either a spouse or colleagues were more cynically evaluated when the individual receiving the favor was powerful (Inesi, Gruenfeld & Galinsky, 2012). Inesi et al (2012) argues that by being in position of power the kind acts of others become more ambiguous (are people being kind only to gain access to something I control?). Without ambiguity kind acts can serve as a building block in strong relationships. However, with ambiguity and the cynical attributions to kind acts of others, the gestures are tainted in the mind of the receiver, in turn diminishing the potential for a strong relationship.

### *1.5 Power impact on behaviour*

Power evidently has an influence on social behaviour. The approach inhibition theory argue that power impacts our behaviour in an integrative way. High and low social power leads to some social consequences. These consequences can be further divided into sub-groups: the behavioural approach system and the behavioural inhibition system (Keltner, Gruenfeldt & Anderson, 2003; Carver, 1994).

The approach system determine behaviour related to sex, food, safety achievement, aggression and social attachment. Rewards and opportunities induce these processes, which guide individual's pursuit of goals in order to reap rewards. Activation of this system cause movement towards a goal.

The behavioural inhibition system involves affective states such as anxiety and evaluation of punishment contingencies in order to avoid these states occurring. This system is more like an alarm system, activated through uncertainty, threat and punishment. As such, the system restricts movement of towards goals.

In terms of high versus low social power this might mean that people who feel powerful tend to experience more approach related moods and affections. Additionally, they act in a more disinhibited way, making them more prone to speak their mind and display behaviour deemed less socially acceptable. This stems from the lack of a nervous feeling which normally restrain certain behaviours. People who feel powerless are more likely to feel negative moods and affections, making them more prone to inhibit their behaviours and restrain themselves to act in congruence with others (Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003). For instance, people high in power are more likely than people in low power to express their true attitudes and opinions as well as perceiving emotions in others (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). In an organisational setting this can have significant influences as a lot of work is centred around exchanging professional opinions and discussing matters with others.

A study by Lai (2014, p. 59) rated 60 participants on their agreeableness to various assertions on sex and leadership. Participants were divided in pairs of one male and one female, and asked to reach consensus on statements such as "men perform better than women in top leadership positions". Women were found to be less assertive about their opinion and more lenient to their male counterpart's view. However, when the female participants were introduced to semantic priming to evoke feelings of power the outcome changed significantly. Female participants primed with power now showed greater persistence and stubbornness in the discussion. Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson (2003) argued that elevated power is associated with disinhibition and therefore empowers the individual to voice their opinions more confidently.

A study by Anderson and Galinsky (2006) on power, optimism and risk-taking found that those primed with high power were more risk-seeking in their

actions, were more optimistic in their perceptions of risk and took more risks in negotiations. In line with Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson's (2003) behavioural approach system, the authors argue that individuals high in power are so focused on outcomes and payoffs that they do not think about the consequences of their actions. They are more confident that they can get away with a range of behaviours deemed less socially acceptable due to less inhibitions. Thus, powerful individuals will be more prone to violate ethical and social norms. This can be explained by the optimism they have in their risk estimates, and thus not perceiving their behaviour as riskier than others'. This lack of inhibition resulting from a high power state can lead to a range of behaviours. For example, a leader with high power are more willing to approach someone who are not performing their best and offer to train them. In the same situation, a leader low on power would resort to inhibition-related behaviour such as compensating the poor performance by increasing own effort or ostracizing or eliminate the individual from the work unit (Ferguson, Ormiston & Moon, 2010). This suggests that low-power individual is more situationally motivated in their responses whereas high-power individuals may have a range of responses.

Galinsky et al., (2008) suggests that people of power are not limited by the forces of the situation, meaning they will not be constricted in voicing their novel ideas in situation limiting creativity for others. Thus they argue that power reduces the influence of the situation. So why are powerful individuals less influenced by the situation? According to Galinsky et al., (2008), it stems from two psychological reasons. First of all, they are not as likely to notice all information. Secondly, even if they notice the information they value it to a lesser extent and therefore are not affected by it in the same way. This might also be because they are more optimistic and risk-seeking as previously mentioned by Anderson and Galinsky (2006).

However, power does not always lead to corruptive or inappropriate behaviour. Handgraaf, Van Dijk, Vermunt, Wilke & De Dreu, (2008) argues that it is not always the case that powerful individuals will exploit those who are deemed powerless. In their study they found results that suggesting that if individuals in power were confronted by those powerless, feelings of social responsibility were aroused. Thus, those in power might deem the use of power inappropriate.



DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceranic (2012) results suggest that the moral identity has an impact on behaviour of self-interest when feeling powerful. This means that power will appreciate moral consciousness in individuals with strong moral identity, similarly moral consciousness will depreciate for those with low moral identity. DeCelles et al., (2012) theorize that the moral consciousness in turn will have an impact on how these individuals behave in regards to their self-interest. This means that high power individuals scoring high on moral identity will increasingly behave in ways which benefits the common good, over self-interest. On the other hand, high power individuals low on moral identity will behave in a more self-oriented manner.

### *1.6 Sarcasm and irony*

In rhetoric, sarcasm and irony are described as modes of expression that breaks with the ordinary way of saying something by questioning or distancing oneself from what one is saying. It relies on the tension, contrast or gap between what is said and what is meant, the purpose being to add humoristic, aesthetic or argumentative effects (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 200). Irony may exist in various forms, such as irony of fate and verbal irony. Irony of fate refers to ironic states of affairs that can be explicitly labelled, whereas in verbal irony an attitude is expressed by a speaker by saying something that is not literally true and might not be explicit either (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989). For example, irony of fate can be a traffic cop getting his licence suspended for driving too fast. The Oxford English Dictionary defines irony as: "the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect". I.e. starting a presentation about saving money by saying that saying that money is not important, while your point is the opposite.

Sarcasm is a form of irony where the purpose is to hurt by uttering a negative, critical or truthful comment about something or someone in a sharp and often satirical way (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989). Depending on what the sender wants to achieve, there are different ways in which irony can be used. Hence, there are various forms of irony, namely Socratic irony, sophisticated irony and sarcastic irony (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 200-204).

Socratic irony is a way of pretending ignorance in order to expose another person's ignorance. Socrates often used this kind of irony by carefully posing questions that would expose someone's ignorance. The work of actor and director

Sacha Baron Cohen heavily rely on this type of sarcasm. For example, Borat, the seemingly ignorant Kazakhstan reporter traveling to America to learn about the greatest country in the world, will during his encounters with locals expose that America is in fact not the greatest country in the world.

Sarcastic irony is the strongest and most influential type of irony, while also being perceived as the most aggressive and negative type because it has to be directed at someone (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 203; Gibbs, 1986). This type of irony is typically used as a “face-saving” tool because the sender can deliver criticism without being perceived as too direct (Jørgensen, 1996).

The focus of this paper will be verbal irony and the two underlying facets, Socratic and sarcastic irony, as they are the most relevant in the context of organisations and leadership.

#### *1.6.2 Gender differences*

In a study conducted by Colston and Lee, (2004) when both male and female participants were asked to judge speakers who used verbal irony (without revealing the sex of the speakers) the majority of respondents thought the ironic speaker was male. Two studies using self-rating, found that male participants report a higher inclination to use irony compared with their female peers (Colston, & Lee, 2004; Ivanko, Pexman, & Olineck, 2004). However, Colston and Lee (2004) point out that men are not necessarily more sarcastic but rather use verbal irony more often.

A study by Baptista, Macedo and Boggio (2015) indicates that both male and female participants were equally competent when attempting to grasp the ironic meaning of different sequences. However, a study by Ivanko et al., (2004) showed that female participants rated ironic statements more sarcastic compared with men, when the statement was directed as a compliment. Additionally, the results suggest that females found criticism or negative remarks less polite than men, which contributes to their argument that females might be more sensitive and therefore experience irony in a more sarcastic manner. Hence, there seems to be general differences in how women and men perceive and use communication in organisations (Tannen, 1995). For instance, a study by Drucker, Fein, Bergerbest and Giora (2014) found that males had an overall higher enjoyment using sarcasm than females.

### ***1.7 The context***

As discussed above, existing literature suggests that power makes individuals more susceptible to display socially unacceptable behaviour. The use of irony and sarcasm, for example, might in certain contexts be deemed inappropriate. As discussed above sarcasm is a form of irony aimed to hurt the receiver, and it is thus of interest to explore how situational power might influence the inclination to use irony and sarcasm.

This experiment will build on a previous master thesis experimenting with power, irony and sarcasm (hereby referred to as “study 1”), and an experiment conducted in the fall of 2016 (hereby referred to as “study 2”) as part of the course Persuasion And Power In Organization. It should be noted that Study 2 is based on Study 1 and aimed to measure the effect of power in setting where respondents were students and predominantly younger than the participants in study 1.

In Study 1 the authors found support for their H1a hypothesis (people in power will use more irony and sarcasm). This contributes to much of the research on power stating that people in power experience less inhibitions. However, there was no support for the hypothesis H1b (Situational power will enhance the tendency to use irony and sarcasm). Regardless, the author points out that those who held a non-managerial position are most influenced by the priming. On the other hand, in Study 2 there is support for H1 (Situational power will enhance the tendency to use irony and sarcasm). This is interesting as it might indicate that when people do not hold a managerial position, it might be that situational power has the ability to increase their inclination to engage in ironic and sarcastic behaviour. In study 1 the lack of support might be ascribed to the fact that it was attempted to prime individuals in power positions. However, both studies found support for their hypothesis that men are more inclined to use irony and sarcasm than their female peers.

The differing results regarding the findings related to H1b and H1 is also noteworthy because in Study 1 they primed participants semantically, asking them to remember a situation where they felt powerful, whereupon they were asked to choose 5 out of 11 constructs related to power (only done for the high power condition). In study 2 however participants were primed only by being presented with either a high or low power case similar to that of study 1. The main difference between the cases in these studies is that study 2 aimed to clarify the situation and answering.

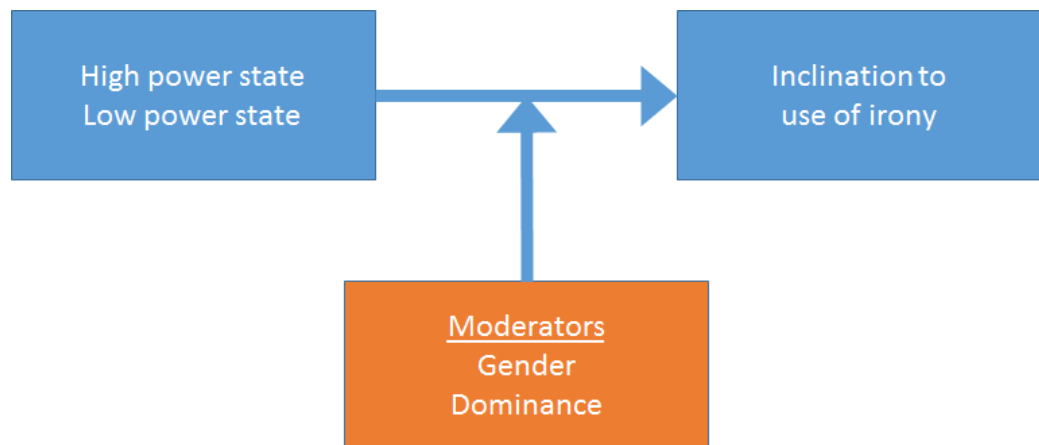
Lai (2014) argues that in order to study the effects of power it is beneficial to perform experiments where homogenous participants are put in comparable groups that receive different priming (high or low power) in a given situation, because this will enable us to study the difference between these groups. As different results were found in the two studies regarding situational power and inclination to use irony, it could be of interest to perform a study where different priming methods are used, to investigate the potential impact it has on the results.

## 2.0 Research question and objectives

*“Does power priming enhance inclination to use irony and sarcasm for individuals not holding a managerial role?”*

The general aim of this experiment is to explore the impact of power priming on individuals' use of irony and sarcasm in a stressful context. Different priming methods will be drawn upon to induce power; case (with either high or low power context), semantic priming (word puzzles) and power posing. Moreover, the study will investigate specific findings from study 1 and study 2 (related to gender), and build upon the methodological framework from those studies. Additionally, this study will look into if gender and trait dominance has an enhancing effect on the use of irony and sarcasm.

### 2.1 Hypotheses



H0: There is no difference between the groups on inclination to use irony and sarcasm, whether primed or not.

H1: Situational power will enhance the tendency to use irony and sarcasm.

H2a: Men are more likely than women to use irony and sarcasm.

H2b: Situational will enhance the tendency to use irony and sarcasm for men.

H2c: Situational power will enhance the tendency to use sarcasm for females.

H3: Trait dominance will enhance the tendency to use irony and sarcasm.

### **3.0 Plan for data collection and thesis progression**

#### *3.1 Data collection*

Data will be collected by the use of self-report questionnaires. Respondents will be given stimuli in the form of a case, which will yield a high power and a low power condition. For the high power situation, additional priming may be used in the form of word puzzles (semantic priming). Online programs, such as Qualtrics, can be used for recruiting and collecting data when respondents are geographically dispersed. If needed, respondents can be recruited by direct means of contact, such as face-to-face or email.

The dominance scale by Ray (1981) can be employed to measure trait dominance in H3. Ideally, and to avoid potential priming effects, this data should be collected around one week after the respondents complete the experiment.

#### *3.2 Progression*

##### **January**

- Development of analytical framework

##### **February**

- Continued development of analytical framework.
- Plan and organize data collection
- Test the data collection and analytical framework on a small sample. Make changes if necessary.

##### **March**

- Data collection

##### **April**

- Data analysis and interpretation
- Write thesis

##### **May**

- Write thesis

##### **June**

- Finalise thesis

*Deadline for finalising thesis: Monday 19. June*

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