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Throwing You Under the Bus: High Power People Knowingly Harm Others When Offered Small Incentives

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The potentially exploitative effects of power and incentive were examined. In the study, 250 participants heard a confederate admit or deny a misdeed and were pressured by the experimenter to inform on the confederate, sometimes in exchange for a small reward. The majority of participants knowingly falsely informed on the confederate when put in a position of high power and offered an incentive. Participants truthfully informed on the confederate regardless of power or incentive. Results are interpreted in light of social psychological theories of social power, which suggest that harmful opportunism is a likely but not inevitable effect of empowerment.

I want to empower women. I want people to be afraid of the women I dress. —Alexander McQueen (Driver, 2011)

Empowerment is a common buzzword in modern-day political dialogue. Minorities, women, the poor, children—all are to be empowered in the name of social justice. Changing the world for the better requires empowering people who have traditionally been denied power. In other words, empowerment is a good thing. For example, Rosa Parks’s empowered moment inspired the civil rights movement in the United States in the mid 20th century. Indeed, a burgeoning social psychological literature on power suggests many positive effects. For example, feeling powerful (via embodiment, social roles—existing or manipulated, or implicit priming; for reviews, see Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2015; Sturm & Antonakis, 2015) increases positive self-view (Briñol, Petty, & Wagner, 2009; Nair, Sagar, Sollers, Consedine, & Broadbent, 2015), pain tolerance (Bohns & Wiltermuth, 2012), performance under stress (Cuddy, Wilmuth, Yap, & Carney, 2015), and action orientation (Huang, Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Guillory, 2011; Park, Streamer, Huang, & Galinsky, 2013), as well as decreases stress (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010). In addition, people who have power are better able to regulate their goal-directed behavior (Guinote, 2007), differentiate goal-relevant from goal-irrelevant information (Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky, & van Dijk, 2008), and seek rewards and opportunities (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). It should be noted that these positive effects are primarily for the empowered person, not for others. But using one’s power as Rosa Parks did could lead to widespread social benefits.

On the other hand, empowerment has a potential dark side, a reason why an empowered person should perhaps be feared as McQueen expresses. The literature on power demonstrates several negative effects of power on those around the powerful person. For example, feeling powerful increases risk taking (Carney et al., 2010; Cesario & McDonald, 2013), selfish and opportunistic financial behaviors (Bendahan, Zehnder, Pralong, & Antonakis, 2015; Rucker, Dubois, & Galinsky, 2011), and dishonest behaviors (Yap, Wazlawek, Lucas, Cuddy, & Carney, 2013). Furthermore, although the powerful are quick to notice injustice to the self, they are slow to notice injustice to others (Sawaoka, Hughes, & Ambady, 2015).

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Thus, power can lead to social benefits, or it can lead to distressing opportunism and selfishness. Extant literature on power supports a cognitive mechanism underlying these two-pronged effects. Power narrows the focus of attention, which could be good or bad depending on the circumstances (Guinote, 2007; Smith et al., 2008; Willis & Guinote, 2011). First, power focuses people on rewards rather than punishments, and second, power focuses people on their own goals rather than broader goals. As long as the situation offers rewards for unselfish behavior, or the powerful person’s goals are consistent with unselfish ends, power will have positive effects for others.

When, then, is a powerful person someone to fear? Under what circumstances will power lead someone to do the right thing, and under what circumstances the wrong thing? Extant research cannot provide complete answers to these questions, because it has not investigated circumstances in which there is a clear moral right and wrong. Some studies have investigated dishonest or selfish behaviors, but many of these behaviors are misdeeds through omission of the right instead of commission of the wrong. Furthermore, a recent review of the social power literature identified a need to investigate situations in which the self-interest of the powerful is pitted against the common good (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Thus the present research was an attempt to create a situation in which there was an unambiguously right and an unambiguously wrong choice, with pressure exerted on the participant to make the right or the wrong choice. This pressure came in two forms: one, the urging of a third party; and two, the offer of a personal incentive (i.e., bribe).

To accomplish this, we created an analog to a real-world situation in which a police investigator interrogates a potential informant and offers an incentive for providing incriminating information about a third party. Such a practice is commonplace—and fully legal—in the United States justice system. However, in far too many cases the offer of an incentive to a potential informant leads to wrongful convictions. For example, consider the case of Kenneth Wymienko. In 1994, Wymienko was wrongfully convicted of criminal sexual conduct, breaking and entering, and armed robbery and sentenced to 40 to 60 years of incarceration. Among the evidence in the prosecution’s case against Wymienko was the false testimony of a fellow inmate who provided incriminating information in exchange for his own reprieve from his life sentence. On June 17, 2003, Wymienko’s conviction was dismissed after postconviction DNA tests proved that he was not culpable (see http://innocenceproject.org for additional information on the Wymienko case). Wymienko’s case is one exemplar that represents a larger problem in the U.S. criminal justice system—the offer of an incentive might provide a sufficient motivation for an informant to behave opportunistically regardless of the veracity of his or her testimony. For example, of the 321 wrongful conviction cases investigated by the Innocence Project (http://innocenceproject.org, December 4, 2014), nearly 20% contained false informant testimony and many of these informants were offered incentives (either money and/or release from prison).

Problems introduced by the elicitation of incentivized testimony are further compounded by the use of persuasive interrogation tactics on informants. According to the Reid Technique described in Criminal Interrogation and Confessions (Inbau, Reid, Buckley, & Jayne, 2001), an informant could and should be interrogated like a suspect if the police believe he or she has information about a crime but is not forthcoming with the information. Suspects in the United States are typically questioned in a guilt-presumptive manner that yields a high proportion of behavioral confirmations that lack diagnosticity (i.e., high rates of confessions regardless of their accuracy; Evans et al., 2013; Horgan, Russano, Meissner, & Evans, 2012; Narchet, Meissner, & Russano, 2011; Russano, Meissner, Narchet, & Kassin, 2005). Thus, informants may be subjected to the same questioning techniques used on suspects. For example, three coworkers provided false incriminating statements only after multiple, lengthy interrogations in the case against Larry Peterson, an exoneree (http://innocenceproject.org). All three of the coworkers later retracted their statements. They cited their desire to escape the pressure of the interrogation as the primary reason for their false statements. Peterson’s and Wymienko’s cases exemplify the potentially biased nature of informant testimony, especially when interrogation tactics and the offer of incentives are used to obtain incriminating information.

In our previous research using a laboratory analog, we found that the combination of these two factors—pressuring interrogation and offer of incentive—increased the rate of false but not true incriminating testimonies (Swanner & Beike, 2010; Swanner, Beike, & Cole, 2010). That is, participants were more likely to give information they knew was false and that incriminated a third party (a confederate) when they were offered incentives for doing so. But they were no more likely to give information they knew was true that incriminated the third party when offered incentives; they were actually quite willing to offer the information with or without incentive.

In the prior research, however, both the participant and the confederate were in positions of equal power, defined as “the capacity to control one’s own and others’ resources and outcomes” (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007, p. 201; for similar definitions, see Fiske, 1993; Keltner et al., 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Prosecutors and police officers often recruit informants who are in a lower position of power in a criminal organization to
inform on those in higher positions of power, offering them incentives such as full pardon for previous crimes in exchange for their testimony (Bloom, 2002). One problem with this arrangement is that, as we have found in our research, the offer of incentives seems to draw out only false information rather than true information. A second problem with this arrangement is that the informant’s perception of power relative to the third party is merely inferred by the interrogator—as an underling, this potential informant must not feel he can control the kingpin’s outcomes—an inference that may be incorrect. Instead, being in a position where he can choose to inform or not inform on the kingpin may momentarily empower the potential informant. This perception of power, combined with the offer of an incentive, may be a particularly dangerous combination.

As research has demonstrated, high power causes people to narrow their focus of attention to potential rewards for the self (Bendahan et al., 2015; Keltner et al., 2003; Rucker et al., 2011; Sawaoka et al., 2015). An empowered informant is therefore sensitized to the offer of an incentive and desensitized to the needs of others, and perhaps even to moral right and wrong. Rather than an incentive bringing forward the meek informant with actual incriminating testimony, then, an incentive may instead encourage an empowered informant to do whatever it takes—including falsely informing on another—to secure the reward. As mentioned earlier, potential informants with actual incriminating evidence are unaffected by the offer of an incentive. Thus, we predicted that empowered potential informants offered an incentive would be highly likely to provide false incriminating evidence about a third party.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted a laboratory analog study to an informant interrogation. A participant was introduced privately to a confederate who either confessed or denied a previous misdeed to the participant. The participant was then put in a position of either high or low power with respect to the confederate and was interrogated by the experimenter regarding what was said about the misdeed. The experimenter, blind to confession/denial condition, attempted to persuade the participant to inform on the confederate. Half of the time, she offered a small reward (an additional research credit) as incentive for informing on the confederate.

It is important to note that in our previous studies, participants who falsely informed on the confederate (i.e., had heard a denial but told the experimenter she had heard a confession) were in almost all cases aware that they themselves were not telling the truth. That is, there was a clearly right and a clearly wrong answer to the experimenter’s interrogation. We predicted that the participant would (a) inform on the confederate more often when offered an incentive, but only after hearing a denial; and (c) be most influenced by the incentive after being put in a position of high power and hearing a denial. In the latter case, the participant would be knowingly choosing the wrong moral action in order to receive a reward, consistent with the focus of attention of empowered people (Keltner et al., 2003).

METHOD

Participants

A total of 250 University of Texas at El Paso undergraduate students participated in the present study for partial fulfillment of course credit. Thirty-nine participants were excluded from the following analyses—30 participants due to a lack of fluency in English, one participant due to confederate error, and eight participants due to suspicion regarding the deception used in the experiment—leaving a total of 211 participants’ data used in the following analyses. The mean age of the participants was 20.92 (SD = 6.37). The majority of the participants identified as female (Mfemale = 67.2%, Mmale = 32.8%) and Hispanic (Mhispanic = 85.7%, Mwhite = 9.0%, all other races <3% each).

Design

The present study conformed to a 2 × 2 × 2 (Confederate Information [Confess, Deny] × Power [High, Low] × Incentive [Absent, Present]) between-participants design.

Procedure

The protocol for the present study was adapted from the one used in Swanner and Beike (2010). Participants were run in dyads, with one person in each dyad being a confederate. As part of the cover story for the experiment, participants were led to believe that they would be participating in a laboratory study that took place on a computer investigating unconscious memory. Upon arrival the experimenter informed the participants that due to technical difficulties with the computer they would not be participating in the unconscious memory study but instead be participating in a study on interpersonal interactions, attitudes, and decision making. The experimenter told the dyad that they would be doing a number of experimental tasks.

Confederate information manipulation. For the first experimental task, the participant and confederate alternated asking and answering questions designed to
be personal yet not too private. All of the questions were adapted from Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, and Bator (1997; see Swanner & Beike, 2010) with the addition of one question: “What were you doing at this time last week?” The additional question was included in order to present the confederate information manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to hear the confederate either confess to or deny a misdeed in a study the previous week (i.e., causing the computer to crash). In the confession condition, the confederate admitted to previously participating in the unconscious memory study and hitting the Tab key, which caused the computer to crash. In the denial condition, the confederate strongly denied hitting the Tab key and causing the computer crash (for exact wording of the confession and denial, see Swanner & Beike, 2010). For the remaining questions, the confederate answered openly and honestly.

Power manipulation. Upon completing the interpersonal interaction items, the experimenter reentered the room and informed the dyad that for the next task they were randomly assigned to roles. They were told that day-to-day people “sometimes have to play different roles—sometimes we are the boss and sometimes we are the employee.” The social power role manipulation was adapted from Chen, Langner, and Mendoza-Denton (2009). The experimenter then explained that one of the two would be the boss while the other would be the employee. Ostensibly, the boss’s (high power) job was to assign the employee (low power) to one of two tasks, and the employee’s job was to complete the assigned task. The high-power participants (or confederates) would seemingly choose between one of two tasks—a stressful or a neutral task. The stressful task seemingly involved having to write, prepare, and give a video-recorded speech, which was to be evaluated by a panel of judges (Josephs & Steele, 1990). The stressful task has been previously used in research to investigate the stress-dampening effect of alcohol and validated as a measure that invokes stress even when thinking about the task (Josephs & Steele, 1990). The neutral task seemingly involved having to write a brief essay about an ordinary daily life event, which has been previously used in research as a control condition task (Pennebaker, 1997).

After explaining the roles and the tasks, the experimenter then informed the dyad which role he or she was assigned. Participants were randomly assigned to either the high-power (boss) or low-power (employee) condition relative to the confederate. Then the experimenter informed the dyad that in order to prevent them from interacting during the task assignment and completion portion of the experiment, one of the two would need to go to a different room. The experimenter removed the confederate from the room and presented the participant with a questionnaire containing a manipulation check regarding predicted stress of the neutral and stressful tasks and perceived social power (1 = not at all; 7 = extremely). The remaining items in the questionnaire were included to bolster the cover story of the experiment.

Incentive manipulation. Upon reentering the room the experimenter told the participants that before completing the assigned task (low-power participants) or assigning the task (high-power participants) that the experimenter would like to talk to them. All participants were informed that the experimenter needed their help. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the incentive present condition, in which the experimenter offered them an additional hour credit for their assistance. The remaining participants were randomly assigned to the incentive absent condition, in which the experimenter did not mention any additional credit.

Interrogation. Then the experimenter interrogated all of the participants in order to obtain a secondary confession with up to eight interrogation prompts (e.g., “Are you sure they didn’t mention anything about hitting the Tab key?”). If at any point during the interrogation the participant provided a verbal secondary confession, then the experimenter wrote on a piece of notebook paper that “the other participant admitted to hitting the Tab key and crashing the computer” and asked the participant to sign the statement. The experimenter recorded at which interrogation prompt the participant was willing to sign a statement. For participants who heard a confession, signing the statement constituted true incriminating information because they would be reporting what they heard. For the participants who heard a denial, signing the statement constituted false incriminating information because they would not be reporting what they heard. In addition, experimenters recorded the number of instances the participants tried to bargain with them (e.g., “Do you have to tell the other person?” “I don’t want to get the other person in trouble”). Experimenters also recorded whether the participant spontaneously changed the wording of the written incriminating statement. These changes were predominantly adding the words “I think” to the beginning of the statement or the word “accidentally” to the middle of the statement.

Recognition test. Subsequently, the experimenter handed the participants the recognition test, which contained recognition items about the confederate’s response and the incentive. The recognition item for the confederate information listed the two possible
responses—confession or denial—and asked the participant to choose which the confederate had actually said during their conversation. In addition participants reported their confidence on a 7-point scale in their answer to the recognition item (1 = not at all confident; 7 = extremely confident). Participants were also presented with the wording of the incentive condition and were asked to respond “yes” or “no” as to whether the experimenter stated it during the session. All participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation. During debriefing, participants were probed for suspicion. Further, the purpose of the study and reasons for using deception were gradually explained to them. Regardless of whether they signed a confession statement, all participants were informed that they would receive 1 extra credit for their participation.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

We assessed how powerful the participants felt, whether participants found the prospect of the speech more stressful than the writing task, and recognition of the incentive and confederate confession information. Participants anticipated the speech (M = 4.60, SD = 1.61) to be more stressful than the writing task (M = 2.28, SD = 1.32, d = 2.60). Participants rated how powerful they felt on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). As predicted and consistent with previous findings, participants in the high-power condition (M = 3.92, SD = 1.80) felt more powerful than those in the low-power condition (M = 3.36, SD = 1.77, d = .32). Ninety percent of participants correctly recognized whether the experimenter provided the incentive (Φ = .86). Eighty-five percent of participants correctly recognized whether the confederate presented a confession or a denial (Φ = .74). Removing participants who did not correctly recognize the incentive or the confederate information does not change the following results; therefore, the data from these participants were retained.

Signed Statements

Consistent with our predictions, participants signed true incriminating statements (M = 85.4%, SD = 35.4) to a greater degree than false incriminating statements (M = 38.0%, SD = 48.8; see Table 1 and Figure 1 for signing rates for all conditions; Φ = .16, odds ratio [OR] = 9.59). The high-power participants signed incriminating statements more when provided the incentive (M = 74.5%, SD = 44.0) than without the incentive (M = 54.9%, SD = 50.3; Φ = .19, OR = 2.41). Furthermore, the increase in signing incriminating statements for high-power participants after the incentive was only present after a denial (M = 58.6%, SD = 40.8; Φ = .21, OR = 5.67) and not

| Table 1 | Percentage of Participants Signing an Incriminating Statement in Each Condition |
|---------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|          | **Confederate Information**     | **Power**                       | **Incentive Condition**         |
|          |                                 |                                 | **No Incentive**                | **Incentive** | **Total** |
|          |                                 |                                 | **n** | **M(SD)** | **n** | **M(SD)** | **n** | **M(SD)** |
| Confess  | High                            | 26                             | 88% (33) | 26 | 92% (27) | 52 | 90% (30) |
|          | Low                             | 28                             | 82% (39) | 23 | 78% (42) | 51 | 80% (40) |
|          | Total                           | 54                             | 85% (36) | 49 | 86% (35) | 103 | 85% (35) |
| Deny     | High                            | 25                             | 20% (41) | 29 | 59% (50) | 54 | 41% (50) |
|          | Low                             | 26                             | 35% (49) | 28 | 36% (49) | 54 | 35% (48) |
|          | Total                           | 51                             | 27% (45) | 57 | 47% (50) | 108 | 38% (49) |
| Total    | High                            | 51                             | 55% (50) | 55 | 75% (44) | 106 | 65% (48) |
|          | Low                             | 54                             | 59% (50) | 51 | 54% (50) | 105 | 57% (50) |
|          | Total                           | 105                            | 57% (50) | 106 | 65% (49) | 211 | 61% (49) |
after a confession ($M_i = 92.3\%$, $SD = 27.2$, $M_{ni} = 88.5\%$, $SD = 32.6$; $\Phi = .05$, $OR = 1.56$). In other words, nearly 60% of high-power participants knowingly provided a false incriminating statement when offered an incentive. However, low-power participants were no more likely to sign an incriminating statement when provided the incentive ($M = 54.9\%$, $SD = 50.3$) than without the incentive ($M = 59.3\%$, $SD = 49.6$; $\Phi = .05$, $OR = .84$).

Furthermore, as evidenced by Figure 2, the signing rate at each interrogation prompt demonstrates that offering incentives provides no advantage at any point during the interrogation in eliciting signing of truthful incriminating statements.

### Willingness to Sign Statements

Due to the high signing rates and potential ceiling effects in the aforementioned dichotomous measure in the confession conditions, we created a willingness-to-sign index to assess a more sensitive continuous dependent measure. Participants who refused to sign the statement were scored as zero, those who signed but changed the wording of the statement (see Method section) were scored as 1, those who signed the statement as worded by the experimenter but engaged in bargaining (see Method section) were scored as 2, and those who signed the statement as is without bargaining were scored as 3. We coded bargaining plus signing an unaltered statement as more compliant than signing an altered statement because the bargainers complied behaviorally by signing an intact statement, which is the original requested behavior. The changers were less compliant because they engaged in a behavior willingly; however, the behavior was not that requested by the experimenter. Thus, the scale ranged from zero (least willing) to 3 (most willing; for descriptive statistics, see Table 2). Participants signed more willingly in the presence of an incentive than the absence ($d = .18$), as well as the presence of a confession than a denial ($d = 1.20$). Consistent with the data from the dichotomous signing variable, high-power participants signed more willingly after a denial when provided with the incentive than without the incentive ($d = .97$). There was no difference in the willingness to sign after hearing a confession with versus without an incentive ($d = .04$).

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confederate Information</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Incentive Condition</th>
<th>No Incentive</th>
<th>Incentive</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>$M (SD)$</td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>$M (SD)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confess</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>2.23 (0.99)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.19 (0.85)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>2.00 (1.15)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.17 (1.23)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2.11 (1.08)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2.18 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deny</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.36 (0.81)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1.45 (1.35)</td>
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<td>Low</td>
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<td>0.68 (1.06)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>1.07 (1.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1.31 (1.30)</td>
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<td>1.80 (1.19)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>1.39 (1.28)</td>
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<td>1.35 (1.35)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>1.35 (1.29)</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>1.58 (1.29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

In the present study, participants heard or did not hear incriminating information from a confederate and then were pressured to inform on the other—to “throw the person under the bus.” Sometimes the participants were offered an incentive to inform on the confederate. Consistent with prior research, high-power informants were more likely to seize upon offers of incentives (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Keltner et al., 2003; Willis & Guinote, 2011). What is novel about this study is that it demonstrated that high-power participants seized upon incentives only when knowingly providing false incriminating statements and not true ones. Nearly 60% of empowered participants knowingly chose to inform upon a fellow student by signing a false statement that the student had admitted to destroying data—merely to receive 1 additional research credit of the 6 required. But participants readily signed truthful incriminating statements regardless of power or the offer of an incentive. In short, incentives seemed to activate a particularly other-destructive motive in high-power participants.

The reasons for this other-destructive motivation for the powerful are not entirely clear. One explanation is that high power induces a focus on rewards rather than punishments (Keltner et al., 2003). When participants heard the confederate admit to the misdeed, there was already plenty of motivation to inform on him or her, for the sake of justice as well as pleasing the experimenter, and neither power nor a reward was necessary. When participants heard the confederate deny the misdeed, however, there was a motivation to please the experimenter by agreeing to sign but a conflicting motivation to promote justice by refusing to sign. The incentive tipped the balance in favor of signing only for high-power people because only they were sufficiently sensitive to the offer of a personal reward. Testing this explanation requires raising the threat of punishment instead of the offer of a reward for signing an incriminating statement: “Unless you sign this statement saying the other person admitted to crashing the computer, I will remove some of the research credits you have already earned.”

A second explanation is an action motivation—high-power people are motivated to act rather than to remain inactive (Huang et al., 2011). To sign the incriminating statement was the only action offered to participants; therefore, high-power informants may have been more motivated to take any action available, especially with the added push of a self-serving incentive. Testing this explanation requires a reframing of the request so that informing on the confederate would require inaction rather than action: “I am going to tell my professor that you said the other participant admitted to crashing the computer, unless you sign this statement saying that isn’t true.” Further research is required to disentangle these two explanations.

It is important to note that the power manipulation in the present study was rather artificial and insignificant (i.e., created in a laboratory through role manipulations), yet it still led to impressive effects. The situation is similar to Milgram’s (1974) studies, in which a person with very little actual authority had a devastatingly large impact on participants’ behavior. In everyday settings, people experience much larger and more meaningful power differences than in the present study, and these power differences can have long-term implications for people’s outcomes. Supervisors have the power to assign duties that may last days, months, or years and to recommend career-altering raises or termination. Teachers control immediate outcomes by assigning activities and lab partners and long-term outcomes by giving grades, documenting violations of academic integrity, and writing reference letters for jobs or admission to graduate programs. In everyday life, empowered people experience much larger and more meaningful incentives for harming others than those offered in the present study. Supervisors are offered raises and promotions for identifying and eliminating poorly performing subordinates. Teachers are publicly congratulated and awarded for holding students to very high, even unachievable standards.

One real-world situation with large power to control another’s outcomes and high rewards for harming others was the inspiration for the present study, the practice of offering incentives in exchange for testimony from informants in criminal proceedings. In fact, by comparing low-power to high-power informants, this study demonstrates that incentives would not entice the persons whom they are purported to entice (low-power informants). Rather, incentives would entice only empowered informants, and only when they could behave in the most opportunistic and socially unjust fashion (i.e., providing information when they have no valid information solely to receive the incentive).

The present article is the third investigating the utility of offering incentives for true and false incriminating statements. Across all of this research on the utility of incentives there has been no evidence of incentives increasing the willingness to offer true testimony. Investigation of degrees of willingness to sign the statement (i.e., compliance) also demonstrated no advantage for offering incentives for truthful incriminating statements. Furthermore, as evidenced by Figure 1 and similar to the results of Swanner and colleagues (Swanner & Beike, 2010; Swanner et al., 2010), at no point during in the interrogations did the offer of an incentive actually increase the signing rate for true incriminating statements. These findings are consistent with research on false self-incriminating confessions resulting from interrogations.
of the suspect (Houston, Meissner, & Evans, 2014). This recent meta-analysis demonstrated that truthful incriminated statements are due to internal motivations (i.e., emotional guilt), whereas false statements are due to external motivations (i.e., pressure of the situation).

Interrogation by the experimenter was employed in the present study, but interrogation is not necessary to produce false testimony in exchange for incentives. For example, in a television interview in the late 1980s, Leslie Vernon White, a career criminal, explained how he would concoct a plausible scenario in which he might have heard a fellow inmate confess to a crime, when in fact he had never met that inmate in person (see Scheck, Neufeld, & Dwyer, 2000, for additional details). No one was interrogating White or pressuring him to deliver this false information; instead, the ever-present offer of an incentive for incriminating others was what motivated him. Steve Vulpis, an associate informant of White’s, described his motivation this way: “Who gives a damn? I want to go home” (Scheck et al., 2000, p. 168).

Therefore, power plus the offer of incentives can lead to incrimination of others even without interrogation. There are unfortunately many real-world situations in which power plus incentive create a corrupting influence. For example, in 2014 police officers in Edmundson, Missouri, a county of St. Louis, were sent a memo by the mayor telling them to increase their rates of giving traffic tickets to citizens. The memo explicitly noted that the officers’ salaries would be increased according to the number of tickets they wrote (Piper, 2014). Without interrogation, but armed with a monetary incentive and a sense of empowerment as officers of the law over mere citizens, these police officers were accused of making false citations in record numbers (Baloko, 2014; Hellerstein, 2015). To quote a Department of Justice report on the causes of Missouri’s police tragedies, many of the officers “appear to see some residents, especially those who live in...predominantly African American areas, less as constituents to be protected than as potential offenders and sources of revenue” (Hellerstein, 2015). In short, incentives induce empowered people to harm rather than to pursue truth or justice.

To be clear, we are not arguing that empowered people should never be offered incentives. But unless there are protections in place, disempowered people who find themselves in the path of empowered people with incentives to harm them will be at particular risk of exploitation. Power makes people more goal driven (Guinote, 2007), as well as influenced by salient situational cues (Hirsh, Galinsky, & Zhong, 2011), so one solution might be to offer a reframing of the goal for empowered people that includes cooperation with the disempowered. For example, the St. Louis county police could have been incentivized not for the number of tickets they wrote but for the reduction in number of traffic accidents or the satisfaction of the community members with the job police are doing with dangerous drivers. In this way, incentives can motivate the empowered to become agents of change for the disempowered.

In closing, the present research when taken together within the larger context of research on power and incentivized behavior demonstrates that power (even a little bit) may lead to wanton disregard for others and for the truth. However, the powerful may not be entirely to blame; it could also be “the nefarious impact of incentivizing the wrong things” (Yap et al., 2013, p. 2287). Thus, future research could investigate the use of incentives to increase prosocial behaviors.

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