Power in group contexts: The influence of group status on promotion and prevention decision making

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This research examines how group status affects the impact of individual power positions on promotion versus prevention choices in group decision making. We consider that high power not only implies control, but also indicates responsibility for the achievement of group goals. We argue that the nature of these goals depends on the current status of the group. In Experiment 1, individuals who were accorded high power showed more promotion-oriented decisions in the low group status condition while decisions were more prevention oriented under high group status. Experiment 2 replicated these effects, and further demonstrated that they only emerge when those in power are explicitly made accountable for the achievement of group goals. These results are discussed in relation to regulatory focus theory, power theories, and the role of social identities and group goals in group dynamics.

In recent years, a broad stream of socio-cognitive research has shown that social power is positively related to action taking (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). For example, the powerful, as compared to the powerless, are more likely to put off an annoying fan, to take a card during a game of blackjack, or to take action in a social dilemma (Galinsky et al., 2003). But what specific kinds of action do power holders take? When do they behave as visionary leaders who focus on promotion and change? When do they take a conservative stance and take action to maintain the status quo? In the current research, we address these issues by examining the influence of group status on promotion and prevention decision making by power holders in groups.

The power-action relationship has mainly been examined in basic socio-cognitive paradigms (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky et al., 2003; Guinote, 2007; Slabu & Guinote, 2010; Smith & Bargh, 2008). In the current research, we extend this perspective to group contexts. Given that power dynamics and decision making typically occurs in groups (e.g., at work, in sports contexts, etc.; Brauer & Bourhis, 2006), it is important
to examine the power–action relation in group contexts. We propose that in addition to the more basic meaning of power in terms of ‘control over the outcomes of others’ (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007) power in groups also implies responsibility for the outcomes and goals of the group (Lammers & Galinsky, 2008).

In the current research, we examine goals stemming from a primary characteristic in inter-group relations, namely the status of the group. Based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we propose that improvement goals (related to a promotion focus) are most salient in low-status groups whereas maintenance goals (related to a prevention focus) are most salient in high-status groups (Ellemers, Scheepers, & Popa, 2010). Given that power holders within a group are most responsible for translating these goals in action (Haslam & Platow, 2001), we predict that power holders in low-status groups will make promotion-focused decisions in order to improve the status of the group whereas power holders in high-status groups will make prevention-focused decisions in order to protect the status of the group.

**Regulatory focus theory**

Regulatory focus theory is a basic motivational theory that distinguishes between two foci of self-regulation: a promotion focus and prevention focus (Higgins, 1997). Self-regulation through a prevention focus is rooted in security needs, one’s responsibilities and ‘oughts’, whereas self-regulation through a promotion focus relates to nurturance needs, aspirations, and ‘ideals’. When trying to achieve their goals, people with a prevention focus are more likely to adopt a vigilant strategy, and focus on the presence versus absence of negative outcomes. People with a promotion focus by contrast are more likely to adopt an eager strategy and focus on the presence versus absence of positive outcomes (Higgins, 1997). It has also been shown that a prevention focus leads to more conservative decision making (avoiding losses), whereas a promotion focus leads to more risky decision making (seeking gains; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Florack & Hartman, 2007; Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000; Maner, Gailliot, Butz, & Peruche, 2007).

Previous research has extended regulatory focus theory to inter-group contexts (see Sassenberg & Woltin, 2008 for an overview). For example, Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah, and Brazy (2007) demonstrated a ‘regulatory fit’ between high group power and a promotion focus, and low group power and a prevention focus (see also Sassenberg, Brazy, Jonas, & Shah, in press). In addition, several lines of research have examined the relation between group status and regulatory focus, although this has revealed a rather mixed picture. Some studies found that low group status induces a prevention focus (Oyserman, Uskul, Yoder, Nesse, & Williams, 2007; Sassenberg & Hansen, 2007), but other research indicates that members of low-status groups can also become promotion focused (Derks, van Laar, & Ellemers, 2006) whereas members of high-status groups can become prevention focused (Ellemers et al., 2010; see also Seibt & Förster, 2004). This suggests that there are other moderating factors that determine the relation between group status and regulatory focus. In the present research, we address individual power positions within the group as a relevant variable that shapes the relation between group status and regulatory focus.

**Power in groups**

Although there is strong evidence for a relationship between power and action, there is also recent evidence that this relationship is moderated by other variables, such as
interpersonal concerns and cultural influences (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Lammers & Galinsky, 2008; Lammers, Stoker, & Stapel, 2009; Zhong, Magee, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2006). For example, although the relation between power and approach behaviour has been well established (Keltner et al., 2003), power is less clearly related to approach in interdependent situations. That is, interdependence tends to make power holders somewhat more cautious as they also take into account the interests of important others who may be affected by the power holder’s decisions (Lammers & Galinsky, 2008). Similar effects have been reported in more collectivistic cultures where power is more strongly associated with a sense of responsibility than in individualist cultures (Zhong et al., 2006). In the current research we build on these notions, and extend them by proposing that having power in groups not only means having control (which is a basic meaning of power) but also implies a sense of responsibility for advancing the goals of the group (Haslam & Platow, 2001).

**Group status and social identity relevant goals**

Group status, that is, the reputation that one’s group enjoys, is a central variable in the psychology of inter-group relations. On the basis of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we propose that in low-status groups motives for status improvement will be salient, whereas in high-status groups motives for identity protection will be salient (Ellemers et al., 2010; Scheepers, 2009; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This implies that whereas members of low-status groups will be predominantly motivated by eagerness needs and improvement goals, which characterize a promotion focus, members of high-status groups will be predominantly motivated by security needs, and maintenance goals, which are typical for a prevention focus (Brodscholl, Kober, & Higgins, 2007; Higgins, 1997). These processes should be particularly visible in the behaviour of those most responsible for the pursuit of these improvement or maintenance goals, namely the power holders of the group as they are in the position to take action on behalf of the group (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Galinsky et al., 2003; Haslam & Platow, 2001).

**The current research**

We present two studies that build on and extend previous investigations, by focusing on the individual’s power position within the group as a relevant determinant of the way status related group goals impact upon the regulatory focus adopted. To test our predictions, we developed a ‘business game’ involving an alleged competition between two companies. During the game, we measured the participants’ strategic inclinations to display promotion and prevention choices in decision making in a series of business decisions. We manipulated the relative status of the company, and whether the participant held low or high power in the company. We also measured the salience of improvement/maintenance goals in the first experiment, and the specific meaning of power (in terms of control or responsibility) in the second experiment. Our main predication is that low group status activates improvement goals and makes power holders relatively more promotion focused whereas high group status elicits maintenance goals and makes power holders relatively more prevention focused. Given that those with less power within the group are less entitled to act on behalf of the group,
we predict that group status is less likely to impact upon the actions undertaken by those with low power.

EXPERIMENT 1
To examine these predictions, we developed a ‘business game’ paradigm in which two companies were said to compete against each other. Participants were assigned to one of two alleged companies and the game consisted of making a series of business decisions. After a first series of decisions, we manipulated the status differences between the companies by providing feedback on which group (company) had made the better decisions so far. At this point, we measured the salience of improvement versus maintenance goals. After this, a second series of business decisions was announced, for which it was explained that a group leader would be assigned to make the final decision for the group, after receiving the advice by the other group members. The participant was either assigned to a leadership position (high power) or advisory position (low power). We examined regulatory focus by assessing the strategy followed in making these business decisions.

Method
Participants and design
Participants were 80 undergraduate students (69% females; age: \( M = 21 \), range: 17–45) at Leiden University, who were paid 5 euros for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (Group Status: Low vs. High) \( \times \) 2 (Power: Low vs. High) design.

Procedure
Upon arrival in the lab, participants were seated in separate cubicles in front of a computer. All further information, manipulations, and measures were delivered via the computer. First, participants received a general introduction and overview of the session. It was explained that the participant would form a team with two other persons, which would compete against another three-person team in a business game. The two teams were presented as representing two different companies: ‘CEVA’ or ‘ACOLON’. It was explained that we knew from earlier research which strategies and decisions were generally the more productive ones for running a company successfully. On the basis of this knowledge, we would provide participants with feedback about the performance of both teams after each round of business decisions. In reality, we only gave (bogus) feedback on the team’s performances after the first round of business decisions, which was our group status manipulation.

We used a minimal group categorization procedure (using a ‘mental association task’; see Scheepers, 2009) to create two teams each consisting of three members. All participants were assigned to the ACLON company.

The game consisted of making a series of business decisions that were divided into two distinct rounds: the first round consisted of ‘internal’ management decisions (e.g., recruitment policies); the second round consisted of ‘external’ business decisions...
(e.g., marketing issues). After the assignment to teams, the first round of business decisions commenced. Participants individually completed four items of ‘internal business decisions’. An example decision is: ‘Things are going badly with your company, and the future is uncertain. Although there are signs that things might improve in the next six months, things might actually also get worse. If you decide to fire one of your employees this will directly save money and make it less likely that your company goes bankrupt. However, when things would eventually improve you could benefit from the work of this employee, which would increase the profit the company makes. What would you do? A. Fire the employee; B. Don’t fire the employee’. For this particular decision, the first option indicates a focus on prevention whereas the second option indicates a focus on promotion. Because the internal decisions were made before the group status and personal power manipulation, they can be regarded as a measure of initial individual preferences for promotion or prevention.

After this first round of business decisions, we induced the group status manipulation, by providing participants with feedback about the performance of the two teams (companies) so far. Participants were told that we had assessed the number of the correct answers to the business decisions for each of the teams. They were then shown a graph that allegedly represented the performance of both groups so far. In the low-status condition, participants learned that their team (ACLON) had gained fewer points than the other team (CEVA) whereas in the high-status condition, participants were informed that their team had performed better than the other team.

After the group status feedback had been provided, the second round of the business game was announced, which focused on external business issues. We explained that this time there would be one person per team who would make the final decision on each issue. This was part of the power manipulation. It was explained that regarding external policies of a company there is often one person (e.g., a CEO) who decides and communicates on the course of action taken by the company. Therefore, in this second round each team would have one person who would make the final decision on behalf of the team, while the other group members would only have an advisory role in making this decision. Participants were informed that leadership and advisory roles would be randomly assigned to team members. In the high-power condition, the participant was assigned the leader role, whereas in the low-power condition the participant was assigned an advisory role.

The business game then continued with four ‘external’ business decisions. An example of such a decision is: ‘After the first year in business, your company has a negative balance of 100,000 euros. The bank is not willing to give you additional credit. However, a friend offers to borrow you 100,000 euros. What would you do with this money? A. Pay your debts and wait for better times to come; B. Invest the money to improve your position on the market’. In this particular case, the first option indicated a prevention answer whereas the second option implied a promotion choice. In the high-power condition, the participant’s computer screen displayed the recommendations allegedly made by other team members. The advisers were always divided in their recommendations (e.g., if one recommended the promotion answer, the other recommended the prevention answer and vice versa), such that the leader could not simply follow the majority vote, but always had to break the tie. In the low-power condition, participants indicated their own preferences in deciding about these same business problems. They were told that their recommendations would be communicated to the other group members, including the group leader, who would make the final decision. The final decision would then be communicated back to the team members.
After completion of this second round of business decisions, participants were informed that they had completed the experiment. They were then debriefed, thanked, and paid for their participation.

**Dependent measures**

The main dependent variable was the regulatory focus strategy displayed by participants in the decisions made during the second round of the business game (i.e., after the group status and power manipulations). We created a promotion focus scale by summing the number of promotion alternatives that the participant had chosen, and a prevention focus scale by summing the number of prevention alternatives that the participant had chosen. As four business decisions had to be made, both scales could run from 0 to 4 and given the dichotomous nature of the items (i.e., one alternative was always promotion focused, and the other prevention focused), the sum of both scales was always 4. We created similar promotion and prevention scales out of the ‘internal’ business decisions that we used as a covariate in the analysis in order to correct for individual differences in the inclination towards a promotion and a prevention focus on this type of task.

The salience of improvement versus maintenance goals was measured just before the second round of the business game using the following item: ‘To what extent do you think that the current standings of the ACLON and CEVA companies in the business game can change?’ Responses were again given by placing crosses on 100-point scales with *not at all* (0) and *very much* (100) as endpoints.

Throughout the experiment, different questions were presented to participants to check the impact of our procedures and manipulations. After the first round of business decisions, and just before the performance feedback, we checked whether the participants were aware of their team membership. Participants responded by indicating which of the two alleged companies they represented: ‘CEVA’ or ‘ACLON’. After the group status manipulation and just before the second round of the business game, we used a similar procedure to check whether participants were aware of the status differences we had induced. In addition, the group status manipulation was checked with the question ‘Which company performed better during this study so far?’ Responses to this question were made by placing a cross on a 100-point scale with *CEVA* (0) and *ACLON* (100) as endpoints. Finally, to examine the extent to which group status was internalized, we included the four-item private subscale of Luhtanen and Crocker’s (1992) collective self-esteem scale (PCSE), modified to fit the current group context. An example item is: ‘I’m glad to be a member of ACLON’. It is important to show effects of the group status manipulation on collective self-esteem in addition to checking the more factual information about the inter-group competition in order to show that the manipulation affects internalized group value (i.e., group status), in addition to the more ‘cold’ cognitive notion of performance differences between the groups (see also Branscombe, Spears, Ellemers, & Doosje, 2002). Participants completed the collective self-esteem items at the end of the experiment by placing crosses on 100-point scales marked with *not at all* (0) and *very much* (100) as endpoints. Finally, we checked the within-group power position manipulation by asking the participants to indicate who would make the final decisions for the group during the second round of the business decisions. The participants responded (using a mouse) by clicking on one of two buttons, one of which was labelled ‘Me’ and the other ‘Someone else’.
Results

Participant attrition and checks
We excluded the data of one participant who indicated her/his group membership incorrectly.\(^1\) There was one participant (1.3%) who reported his/her group’s status not in line with the intended manipulation. After giving the incorrect response however, the participant was prompted with the correct response. The continuous status check was analysed with a 2(Group Status: Low vs. High) \(\times\) 2(Power: Low vs. High) ANOVA. The only effect that emerged from this analysis was a strong main effect for group status, \(F(1, 75) = 525.31, p < .001\). In line with expectations, participants in the high-status condition reported higher groups status (\(M = 81.10, SD = 10.08\)) than participants in the low-status condition (\(M = 22.23, SD = 12.58\)). A similar ANOVA on the collective self-esteem scale (\(\alpha = .57\)) revealed only a significant main effect of status, which indicated that participants in the high-status group ascribed more value to their group (\(M = 71.51, SD = 11.83\)) than did the participants in the low-status condition (\(M = 64.09, SD = 12.33\)), \(F(1, 75) = 7.27, p = .009\). This result further underlines the effectiveness of the status manipulation as it indicates that participants internalize the status of their group, and that this effect lasted till the end of the experiment. Finally, one participant (1.3%) failed to give the correct answer on the power manipulation check. After giving the incorrect response, the participant was prompted with the correct response before continuing with the experiment. In sum, we can conclude that the manipulations were successful.

Salience of improvement versus maintenance goals
The item measuring the salience of improvement versus maintenance goals was analysed using a 2(Group Status: Low vs. High) \(\times\) 2(Power: Low vs. High) ANOVA, which only revealed a significant main effect for status: Participants in the low-status condition indicated more strongly that status relations might change (\(M = 70.38, SD = 19.26\)) than participants in the high-status condition (\(M = 59.68, SD = 24.06\)), \(F(1, 75) = 4.92, p = .030\). This is consistent with the notion that low current group status induces a focus on status improvement, whereas high group status makes people focus on status maintenance.

Promotion versus prevention choices during the business game
The means on the promotion and prevention scale of the external business decisions as a function of group status and power are displayed in Figure 1. A 2(Group Status; Low vs. High) \(\times\) 2(Power; Low vs. High) ANCOVA on the external promotion scale with the internal promotion business decisions as a covariate to control for initial individual differences in focus, revealed main effects for group status and power, both \(F_s(1, 74) > 3.81, both ps < .056\), which were qualified by a significant interaction between these

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\(^1\)Being aware of one’s group membership is a general and fundamental part of the procedure. Therefore, we excluded this participant because we assumed that s/he did not participate seriously. We did not exclude the participants who gave incorrect responses to the status and power checks (i.e., checks on the manipulation) however, not to violate the random assignment of participants to conditions. However, excluding the data of the participants who gave incorrect responses to the manipulation checks did not dramatically alter the results of the current two studies. That is, all the significant effects that are currently reported remained significant when excluding the data of the participants who gave incorrect responses to the manipulation checks.
two variables, $F(1, 74) = 4.57, p = .036$. When having high power, participants in the high-status condition made less promotion focused (and thus more prevention focused) decisions than participants in the low-status condition, $F(1, 74) = 8.86, p = .004$. For those low in power there were no differences between those who were in the low- and high-status group, $F(1, 74) = 0.01, \text{ns}$.

**Discussion**

In line with predictions derived from social identity theory, inducing low group status increases the concern with improvement goals (as evident from an emphasis on status instability), whereas high status induces a focus on maintenance goals (emphasis on status stability). Importantly however, and fully in line with our expectations, these goals only translated into action for those who had power within the group: Power holders in a low-status group were relatively more promotion focused in their decisions, whereas power holders in a high-status group displayed more evidence of prevention-focused decisions. We did not find different action tendencies for those low in power. Thus, this first experiment provides initial evidence that a position of power carries promotion as well as prevention aspects, and that the social context, and social identity-based group goals more in particular, can determine which focus emerges.

It is important to note at this point, however, that power holders not always act in line with the interests of the group (Maner & Mead, 2010). Therefore, in the second experiment we examined a potentially important boundary condition for the effects we propose: The power holder’s *accountability* towards the group (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Keltner *et al.*, 2003; Magee, Gruenfeld, Keltner, & Galinsky, 2005). Accountability

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2There were no differences between the conditions on the internal business decisions ($F$s < 0.1, ns). The covariate was significant, $F(1, 74) = 7.80, p = .007$. 

is defined as the expectation that one may be called on to justify one’s actions to others (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). In line with work on the strategic dimension of the SIDE model (Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995) the awareness that other in-group members can monitor one’s behaviour induces behaviour consistent with group norms, such as working towards group status improvement in the case of low-status groups (Barreto & Ellemers 2000; Scheepers, Spears, Doosje, & Manstead, 2006). In Experiment 1, accountability was relatively high across the board, as other group members could see the recommendations and decisions that were made, and it was explicitly mentioned that individuals could be held responsible by others in the group for the decisions they made. To be able to examine the influence of accountability more directly, a second experiment was conducted.

EXPERIMENT 2

For the second experiment, we used a similar paradigm as in Experiment 1, and manipulated group status with the same procedure. However, there were also two important changes compared to the first experiment: First, this time all participants were assigned to the leadership (i.e., power holder) role, as we were most interested in how high power might result in either promotion- or prevention-focused responses, depending on the current status of the group. Second, in this second experiment we manipulated the extent to which the leader was accountable for his/her decisions. Following similar manipulations as in previous research (e.g., Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Scheepers et al., 2006) participants in the accountable condition were told that at the end of the experiment they would have to explain their decisions to the other members of their team. Participants in the ‘not accountable’ condition were explicitly told that they would not have to explain their decisions to the other team members. As accountability was relatively high across the board in Experiment 1, we expected to replicate our initial findings in the high-accountability condition of Experiment 2. That is, we anticipated that accountable leaders of a low-status group would display promotion-focused responses, while accountable leaders of a high-status group should be relatively more prevention focused.

We also measured the meaning of power, in terms of control versus responsibility, in this experiment. We expected that in the most basic psychological sense having power always means having control. In addition, in the interdependent group contexts that we study here, where the power holder decides over the fate of the group, having power also means responsibility for the outcomes of others (Chen et al., 2001; Lammers & Galinsky, 2008; Winter & Barenbaum, 1985; Zhong et al., 2006). Although we expect that – due to the interdependence implied in the group context we examined – overall power is relatively likely to raise a sense of responsibility. Nevertheless, we anticipate this to be the case especially for power holders in high-status groups, which is predicted to raise a focus on prevention, as responsibility is one of the core dimensions of a prevention focus (Higgins, 1997). We expected no differences in the low-accountable condition as a function of group status.

Method

Participants and design
Participants were 84 undergraduate students (75% females; age: $M = 22$, range: 17–45) at Leiden University. They were paid 6 euros for their participation in this and another
(unrelated) experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to $2(\text{Group Status}: \text{Low vs. High}) \times 2(\text{Accountable: No vs. Yes})$ design.

**Procedure**
The procedure was identical to that of Experiment 1, except that in this experiment all participants were assigned to the leadership position and that we manipulated the accountability of the decisions that they would make. Accountability was manipulated in the same phase of the experiment as the power itself was induced. In the accountable condition, the participants were told that they would have to account for the final decisions they made on behalf of the group during the second round of the business game, to other members of their group. They were told that after completion of the game, the members of the team would meet face-to-face in a different room, and that the leader would have to account for the decisions made. In the not-accountable condition, it was explicitly mentioned that the leader would *not* have to account for the decisions made during the second round of the business game.

**Dependent measures**
Our main dependent variable again consisted of the business decisions made by participants during the second round of the business game (i.e., the external business decisions). We calculated promotion and prevention scores in the same way as in Experiment 1.

After the power-induction and accountability manipulation, but before the second round of the business task we measured the meaning of power using nine items: five items measured the control component of power (e.g., ‘The fact that I have to make the final decision on each external business item gives me a sense of control’), and four items measured the responsibility component of power (e.g., ‘The fact that I have to make the final decision on each external business item gives me a feeling of responsibility’).

We included the same checks for group membership, status, and power as in Experiment 1. In addition, just before the external business decisions were presented, we checked the successfulness of the accountability manipulation with one item: ‘To what extent do you think that other members of your team will get to know your final decisions on the business decisions?’ Participants again responded to this item by placing a cross on a 100-point scale with *not at all* (0) and *very much* (100) as endpoints.

**Results**

**Participant attrition and checks**
Two participants displayed suspicion during the debriefing, while four participants indicated their group membership incorrectly. The data of these participants, which were evenly divided over conditions ($\chi^2 = 0.60, N = 6$, ns), were excluded from further analysis. There were six participants (7.7%) that reported their group’s status not in line with the intended manipulation. After giving the incorrect response, these participants were prompted with the correct response, and they were retained in the analyses. The continuous status check was analysed with a $2(\text{Group Status}: \text{Low vs. High}) \times 2(\text{Accountable: No vs. Yes})$ ANOVA. There was a strong main effect for group status, $F(1, 74) = 503.00, p < .001$, which indicated that participants in the high-status
condition reported higher group status ($M = 84.80, SD = 11.48$) than participants in the low-status condition ($M = 20.97, SD = 13.77$). There was again also evidence that group status was internalized as participants in the high-status group displayed higher collective self-esteem ($\alpha = .67; M = 72.26, SD = 14.26$) than did the participants in the low-status condition ($M = 63.72, SD = 12.31$), $F(1, 74) = 7.99, p = .006$. On the power check, all participants correctly indicated that they would make the final decision for their group on the external business decisions. Finally, a 2(Group Status: Low vs. High) × 2(Accountable: No vs. Yes) ANOVA on the accountability check revealed a main effect of accountability, $F(1, 74) = 3.95, p = .05$, indicating that participants in the accountable condition thought to a greater extent that the other members in their group would get to know their final decisions on the external business decisions ($M = 74.92, SD = 21.50$) than participants in the not accountable condition ($M = 65.03, SD = 21.74$). In summary, we can conclude that the manipulations were successful.

**The meaning of power**

The scales measuring the control and responsibility components of power were both sufficiently reliable ($\alpha = .61$ and $\alpha = .65$, respectively). Both meanings of power proved to be important in the current context, as indicated by that the scores on the control scale ($M = 62.76, SD = 11.63$) as well as the responsibility scale ($M = 78.34, SD = 11.55$) were both significantly greater than the midpoint of the scales (i.e., 50), $t$s > 9.50, $p$s < .001. A 2(Group Status: Low vs. High) × 2(Accountable: No vs. Yes) × 2(Meaning of Power: Control vs. Responsibility) repeated-measures MANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor revealed a main effect of meaning of power, indicating that in the current group context the responsibility component of power was more important than the control component, $F(1, 74) = 76.22, p < .001$. This main effect was qualified, however, by an interaction with group status, $F(1, 74) = 4.11, p = .046$, indicating that power was more associated with responsibility for members of the high-status group ($M = 81.16, SD = 10.21$) than for members of the low-status group ($M = 75.21, SD = 12.26$), $F(1, 74) = 5.33, p = .024$. With regard to the control dimension of power there were no differences between the low-status ($M = 63.41, SD = 09.35$) and the high-status conditions ($M = 62.18, SD = 13.45$), $F(1, 74) = 0.21, ns$.

**Promotion versus prevention choices during the business game**

The means on the promotion and prevention scale of the external business decisions as a function of group status and accountability are displayed in Figure 2. A 2(Group Status; Low vs. High) × 2(Accountability; Low vs. High) ANCOVA on the promotion scale with the internal business decisions (promotion scale) as a covariate, revealed a significant two-way interaction between group status and accountability, $F(1, 73) = 6.81, p = .011$. In the high-accountability condition, power holders in the high-status condition were less promotion focused (and more prevention focused) than participants in the low-status condition, $F(1, 73) = 4.23, p = .043$. The low-accountable condition showed no such effect, and there was even a trend in the opposite direction, $F(1, 73) = 2.66, p = .11$.

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3 There were no differences between the conditions on the internal business decisions ($Fs < 0.1, ns$). The covariate was marginally significant, $F(1, 73) = 3.71, p = .058$. 

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Discussion

In this second experiment we aimed to replicate the findings of Experiment 1, and further examined whether the predicted effects indeed depend on the accountability in decision making by the leaders of low- and high-status groups. If our reasoning is valid, then our main prediction (that leaders of low-status groups will be more promotion focused and leaders of high-status groups more prevention focused), should emerge in particular in situations where leader accountability is relatively high, as was the case in the first experiment. In line with this argument we replicated the results of Experiment 1 under accountable conditions, showing that leaders of low-status groups are relatively more promotion focused and leaders of high-status groups more prevention focused. However, as predicted, these effects did not emerge when leaders held power without being accountable for the achievement of group goals.

Further evidence for the validity of our reasoning can be found in the measures with which we directly assessed the different meanings power can have. These enabled us to show that power in this group context has more a responsibility meaning than a control meaning, and that this more prevention-focused meaning of power (responsibility) is especially prevalent in leaders of high-status groups. Nevertheless, power implied control to an equal extent in the low- and high-status groups, which reflects that control is the more basic (or even defining) meaning of power. That is, power always implies a sense of control while the degree to which power holders carry responsibility can vary across situations. This latter meaning of power becomes especially salient in situations in which the leader can spoil it for the group, as in the case of the high-status groups examined here.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the current research, we examined the influence of power in groups on regulatory focus in decision making. Combining research on social identity theory and the
power–action link, we predicted that while low group status makes improvement goals salient whereas high group status makes maintenance goals salient, this will only lead to promotion and prevention action for those with relatively high power in the group. We furthermore predicted that these effects would occur in situations in which the power holder is relatively accountable towards other group members, because accountability increases the tendency to act in ways that benefit the group’s goals.

The results of two experiments were in line with these predictions. In the first experiment, we found that having power in a low-status group elicited relatively more promotion-focused decisions whereas having power in a high-status group induced more prevention-focused decision making. While in the first experiment accountability was relatively high in all conditions, in the second experiment we explicitly manipulated accountability, independently of the status of the group. We replicated the finding of Experiment 1 that power holders in low-status groups are relatively more promotion focused and power holders in high-status groups more prevention focused, but only under accountable conditions. The implications of these results for the psychology of power and social identity theory will now be discussed.

**Implications for the psychology of power**

In the most general sense, the current results fit with the more functionalist perspectives on power in that power holders seem to do what is most desirable to do in a certain context (see also Guinote, 2007; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). At a more specific level, the current work illustrates two different faces of power (cf. Lammers & Galinsky, 2008; Lammers et al., 2009). On the one hand power means having control, on the other hand power can also mean responsibility and the risk of ‘losing face’. The former meaning of power is the most basic meaning of power, and we showed that it was indeed not influenced by the status of one’s group. The ‘responsibility’ meaning of power is most related to a prevention focus and is most likely to arise in more ‘social’ contexts, when there is interdependence, or when power holders have to decide over the fate of relevant others such as the members of their group. In line with this reasoning, we showed that the responsibility meaning of power was more prevalent in situations where maintenance of the group’s prestige depended on the power holder (i.e., in the case of high group status).

Although power has previously been conceptualized as positive and desirable (Keltner et al., 2003), the current work shows that having power can also be a burden. This is in line with data from the BBC prison study (a conceptual replication of the Stanford Prison experiment) revealing greater physiological stress responses for the guards than for the prisoners (Haslam & Reicher, 2006). The burden of having power is also illustrated by the results of an experiment where 55% of the participants preferred to have a subordinate (assistant) rather than a superordinate (boss) role during a dyadic interaction (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2003). The current research adds to this previous work by showing that power has not just promotion components but also prevention components (see also Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Lammers & Galinsky, 2008; Zhong et al., 2006). Additionally, these data show that the current status of the group can help bring to the fore these different implications of power and their consequences for the adoption of specific decision making strategies.
Implications for social identity theory
The results of the current experiments extend insights from social identity theory, indicating that members of low-status groups are motivated to improve the status of their group whereas members of high-status groups are motivated to protect the status of their group (Scheepers, 2009; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Experiment 1 shows that these motivations are particularly salient for group members high in power. This is in keeping with the social identity perspective on leadership, which maintains that those who represent the prototype of the group, and thereby its motives and interests, are most likely to emerge as group leaders (Ellemers et al., 2004; Haslam & Platow, 2001). The current results provide evidence for the reverse relation, in that they show that group motives and interests also impact on the behavioural choices made by the group leader.

A further contribution of this work to the social identity literature is that it illustrates some of the ways in which inter-group comparisons affect intra-group processes and vice versa. The social identity perspective has tended to focus on how different groups compare to each other in terms of their status, and has examined how this affects responses of individual group members. Extending previous work, the current research demonstrates that the impact of inter-group comparisons on the responses of individual group members also depends on intra-group dynamics (i.e., their power position in the group). Thus, we have shown that the development of motivations for group-status improvement or maintenance not only depends on how the group compares to other groups in terms of its current status, but also on the personal power position of the individual in the group (see also Postmes & Jetten, 2006; Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996).

Limitations and future directions
Although we think that the reasoning and results presented above can be applied to a wide range of group contexts (leadership in sports teams, work contexts) there are at least two potentially constraining factors. First, our reasoning is especially relevant in the context of newly appointed power holders who are not (fully) responsible for the current status of the group. For example, when a power holder is personally responsible for the low-status position held by his or her group, it is less likely that he or she will be promotion focused (rather he/she will be prevention focused as his/her position will be rather insecure; Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008; Smith, Jost, & Vijay, 2008). It should be noted however that mobility of leaders in, for example, sports and business contexts is quite high, as poorly performing leaders are likely to be replaced, while successful leaders are often attracted by other (more powerful) parties. As a result, in many situations people may find themselves holding power over a group whose current achievements are relatively unrelated to their own efforts—similar to the situation examined here.

Second, it should be noted that we examined group status and power in the context of inter-group competition, which has been shown to increase the group goal-directed behaviour of power holders within groups (Maner & Mead, 2010). We do not see this as a serious limitation, however, as power dynamics do actually take place in competitive environments (e.g., business and sports contexts). In addition, we base our reasoning on the motivations for the improvement and protection of group status in which competition is almost inevitable (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975). Still, it would be interesting to test in future research whether similar results can also be observed in less competitive contexts.
Conclusion
With these two studies, we have further illustrated the ‘two faces’ of power and its consequences for the emergence of promotion and prevention strategies in decision making. We have connected theoretical insights on social identity theory, power, and regulatory focus to examine the interplay between inter-group comparisons, and intra-group dynamics. This has allowed us to demonstrate that the implications of power on the adoption of a promotion or prevention orientation depend on whether the current status of the group elicits improvement goals or maintenance goals, in particular when the power holder feels accountable for the achievement of group goals.

Acknowledgement
The authors would like to thank Amanda Labordus for her assistance in data collection for Experiment 1.

References


Received 16 November 2009; revised version received 25 July 2011