


## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Power corrupts and being sure of felt power corrupts even more: Implications for immoral decisions and cheating

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## Funding information

Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (Spain), Grant/Award Number: PID2020-116651GB-C31

## Abstract

Feeling powerful has been generally associated with cheating. We argue that being sure of felt power strengthens the ability of perceived power to influence cheating and guide immoral decisions. In three different studies, we predicted and found that confidence (measured or manipulated) moderated the impact of felt power (measured or manipulated) on making immoral decisions during the Covid-19 pandemic and actual cheating behaviour. Results indicated that power predicted cheating especially when participants were sure of their felt power. For those with low confidence, felt power did not affect cheating. Among other implications, these studies specify when and for whom the undesired effects of felt power can emerge and how to undermine them.

## KEYWORDS

cheating, confidence, immoral decisions, power, self-validation

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Power is an important motivating force in human interactions (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Turner, 2005) influencing decisions in organisational (Moskowitz et al., 1994; Goodwin et al., 2000), political (Nullmeier & Pritzlaff, 2010), consumer (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) and interpersonal contexts (Richeson & Ambady, 2003). Indeed, there is a large body of evidence of the association between power stemming from organisational hierarchy (Lammers et al., 2011) and social class (Dubois et al., 2015) and cheating in natural settings. Importantly, simply feeling powerful has been also associated with cheating (Boles et al., 2000; Carney et al., 2015; Lammers et al., 2010; Rucker & Galinsky, 2016).

A unique context in which cheating and other immoral behaviours has been found to be prevalent is during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ikram & Rabbani, 2021; Ndovela & Marimuthu, 2022; Yazici et al., 2022). For example, during 2020–2021, as soon as the first vaccines were approved, some people did not want to wait until their official turn to get the shot and instead jumped in line to get their vaccine first. Relevant to the present concerns, many of those individuals who

jumped in line could be classified as having powerful positions (e.g. wealthy individuals, royalty, high ranking army members, politicians, etc.). Therefore, we argue that power was associated with cheating in the pandemic context. Consistent with that proposition, the aim of the present research is to examine the influence of felt power on immoral decisions in the context of the pandemic and beyond using not only correlational but also experimental designs that allow for more causal control. Most uniquely, the current research was designed to examine to what extent feeling sure of one's felt power could enhance the ability of power to guide immoral decisions and actions.

Although prior research has been supportive of the presence of a positive relationship between power and cheating, some research has obtained mixed findings. For example, DeCelles et al. (2012) found that feelings of power amplified moral awareness in individuals with a strong moral identity, whereas those same feelings of power attenuated moral concerns in people with a weak moral identity. Furthermore, Cai et al. (2023) discovered that the impact of power on corruption varies depending on cultural factors with power being associated with higher levels of corruption in individualistic

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(vs. collectivistic) cultures and orientations. These results are consistent with the views by Hirsh et al. (2011) who argue that whether the dominant response stems from an individual's disposition or the situation, power diminishes the salience of alternative response options, thereby disinhibiting both prosocial and antisocial behaviours. Finally, Lammers et al. (2015), in their review on power and morality, highlighted that power can engender both corruption in some individuals but also moral elevation in others. According to these authors, power may foster corruption by diminishing inhibitions towards immoral inclinations, but it can also promote ethical conduct by strengthening moral impulses.

Consistent with these previous approaches, we propose that the impact of felt power on cheating can be moderated by other factors. As described next, we propose that being sure of one's felt power strengthens the ability of perceived power to influence cheating and guide immoral decisions.

The idea that felt power held with confidence (i.e. being sure of one's feelings of power) can be more impactful in guiding judgements and behaviour is a core postulate of Self-Validation Theory (SVT; Briñol & Petty, 2022). SVT provides an integrative framework for understanding why, when and for whom perceptions of power (and any other thoughts) are more predictive of judgement and behaviour. According to this meta-cognitive approach, any mental contents, including feelings of power, become more consequential for judgement and action as the confidence (i.e. perceived validity) in that mental content (felt power) is increased.

Perceptions of validity are a form of secondary cognition or metacognition because they involve thinking about the validity of thoughts (Jost et al., 1998; Briñol & DeMarree, 2012; Goupil & Kouider, 2019). Perceived validity can be measured efficiently by asking participants to report how confident they are in their thoughts. As will be described shortly, participants can report how sure they are in their felt power. Furthermore, perceived validity can be manipulated in various ways, including incidental inductions such as priming people to recall past episodes in which they felt confident (Petty et al., 2002). These incidental inductions of confidence following thinking can affect the perceived validity of the mental content accessible at any given moment, including thoughts that are entirely unrelated to the validation induction such as perceptions of power. Consistent with the SVT framework, high (vs. low) perceived validity (either measured or manipulated) is expected to improve the ability of felt power to predict immoral decisions and cheating behaviour.

Initial indirect evidence about the plausibility of the SVT approach in this domain comes from prior work by Lammers et al. (2017). In their studies, felt power predicted cheating relevant outcomes to a greater extent for participants who generated power memories with ease (vs. difficulty). For example, in one of these studies, participants were asked to recall either a time in which they had power over another individual (high power condition), or some other person had power over them (low power condition). Therefore, power was the initial cognition in this study. Then, participants reported the ease with which those memories came to mind. Therefore, reported ease can be considered the meta-cognitive, secondary assessment in that study (Schwarz, 2004).

Finally, unethical behaviour was measured by asking participants how acceptable they considered that it would be to break the speed limit to make it to an appointment on time. Results showed that high (vs. low) induced power was associated with more willingness to speed but only when participants said that the power memories came to mind with ease. Given the well-established relationship between ease of retrieval and confidence (Tormala et al., 2002, 2007), these findings by Lammers et al. (2017) suggest that power can be more likely to influence cheating especially when felt power is accompanied by high perceived validity regardless of whether that confidence comes from ease or any other potential antecedent.

In the current research, instead of focusing on ease as a proxy to confidence, we focus directly on confidence to examine variations in the perceived validity of felt power. Keeping the number of power-memories constant across conditions (and keeping the ease associated with those memories also controlled), the present research measures and manipulates confidence in felt power directly to examine the proposed SVT hypothesis. As noted, consistent with SVT, high perceived validity (as measured or manipulated through confidence) is expected to improve the ability of felt power to predict immoral decisions and cheating behaviour both in the context of the pandemic and beyond. Specifically, high (vs low) power is expected to increase cheating but especially for participants with high (vs. low) confidence in their felt power. If proved correct, these studies have the potential to provide convergent evidence for the power-cheating link and also specify when and for whom that effect is more likely to appear.

## 2 | OVERVIEW

The present research was designed to examine the link between felt power and immoral decisions during the Covid-19 pandemic and also to extend the contribution beyond that context to other general behavioural measures of cheating. Most relevant, this research also examines the extent to which being sure of one's felt power could strengthen the ability of feelings of power to predict these negative consequences. Three studies were conducted varying the materials, contexts, inductions and outcomes assessed. Study 1 used a correlational design in which individual differences in felt power and the confidence associated with those feelings of power were both measured. Specifically, participants were first asked to respond to the Generalised Sense of Power Scale (Anderson et al., 2012). Confidence was then assessed by asking participants to rate how confident they were in their responses to the power inventory.

Study 2 moved to an experimental design in which felt power was manipulated by asking participants to recall personal characteristics that made them feel either powerful or powerless. This induction of power was designed to vary momentary feelings of power. Then, confidence was manipulated by asking participants to recall past experiences of confidence versus doubt. These two studies were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and used a 'sneaking into the queue' paradigm as the key dependent variable. Specifically, during the

pandemic, participants were offered the possibility of being included in a priority vaccination list even if they were not eligible for the vaccine at that time (immoral decision) or to decline that possibility and wait for their turn (moral decision).

Study 3 also used an experimental design by manipulating both felt power and confidence. To generalise beyond the pandemic context, in this final study we relied on a completely different dependent variable assessing actual cheating behaviour. This outcome consisted of giving participants the opportunity to lie about their performance to gain more money (an action that could be considered as a corrupt behaviour; Goldsmith & Dhar, 2013; Goldsmith et al. 2018). Therefore, along with some further refinements and control measures, the key feature of this final study consisted of using a previously validated measure of cheating behaviour, moving from immoral decisions to actual cheating and moving from the pandemic context to a more general domain.

Across studies, we expected felt power to be associated with immoral decisions and cheating behaviour as in much prior research. Most uniquely, we expected confidence to moderate that effect. Specifically, we hypothesised that high (vs. low) confidence (either measured or manipulated) would improve the ability of felt power to predict immoral decisions and cheating. For low confidence, the effect of power was expected to be undermined.

### 3 | STUDY 1

The purpose of this study was to explore the association between individual differences in perceived power and immoral decisions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the goal of this study was to test the extent to which reported confidence in one's scale responses could strengthen the association between felt power and immoral decisions. In this study, participants began by completing the Spanish version of the Generalised Sense of Power Scale (Anderson et al., 2012). Next, they were asked to report the perceived validity of their responses to the scale by rating the confidence in their scores. Then, participants were presented with a 'sneaking into the queue' paradigm for the Covid vaccine (Paredes et al., 2021).

Individual differences in felt power were expected to correlate with immoral decisions. Specifically, we predicted a two-way interaction between felt power and confidence on immoral decisions towards jumping the line, such that the greater the confidence in felt power, the stronger the power-immoral decision association.

## 3.1 | Methods

### 3.1.1 | Participants and design

A total of 296 undergraduate students (91.2% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.86$ ,  $SD = 2.78$ ) participated anonymously in this study in exchange for course credit in February 2021. Participants provided their informed consent prior to participating, and we followed all ethical guidelines

for treatment of human subjects. Individual differences in power and confidence were the predictor variables. Making an immoral decision was the main dependent variable. Prior research on power and ease (Lammers et al., 2017) has shown large effect sizes on cheating-related outcomes (Cohen's  $f^2 = .122$ ) suggesting that a sample size of 68 participants could be enough for an initial study. Because we anticipated that the effect might be smaller due to this specific context, we kept running participants until the end of the second week in which the study was posted, reaching a final sample of 296. We did not start to analyse the data until this stopping rule was met. The final sample size obtained provided .80 power to detect an interaction effect size larger than Cohen's  $f^2 = .013$ .

### 3.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were notified that they were chosen to participate in a validation study aimed at assessing the viability of future research materials. First, participants completed the Spanish version of the validated Generalised Sense of Power Scale (Anderson et al., 2012). Next, they rated their degree of confidence regarding their responses to the power scale. Participants were then presented with a 'sneaking into the queue' paradigm adapted from prior research by Paredes et al. (2021, Experiment 2) and explained below. Finally, participants had to answer demographic questions, were thanked and debriefed.

### 3.1.3 | Independent variables

**Perceived power.** All participants completed the 8-item Generalised Sense of Power Scale (Anderson et al., 2012) that was originally developed in English, and subsequently translated to Spanish by Willis et al. (2016).<sup>1</sup> The scale includes items such as 'I can make people do what I want them to do' or 'If I want to, I am the one who makes the decisions.' Each item is answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *fully agree*. Items were intercorrelated ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and, therefore, were averaged to create a merged index of individual differences in perceived power ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ). Prior literature has shown that this instrument has good reliability and validity properties (Willis et al., 2016; Alonso-Ferres et al., 2021).

**Confidence.** Participants rated their degree of confidence regarding their responses to the power scale on one 9-point semantic differential scale anchored at 1 = *not at all* and 9 = *extremely confident* ( $M = 7.57$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ). This is an efficient measure to assess confidence able to moderate the use of standardised inventories unrelated to power (Santos et al., 2019; Paredes et al., 2020).

<sup>1</sup> To test the Factor structure, we performed an Exploratory Factor Analysis through the Pearson correlation matrix using maximum likelihood and direct oblimin as the estimation and rotation methods, respectively (Ferguson & Cox, 1993). While the original scale has a single factor, the Spanish validation included two factors (soft power  $\alpha = .79$ ; harsh power  $\alpha = .67$ ). The Spanish version of the scale used in this particular study showed three factors that explained more than 70% of the total variance. We report the analysis with the three separated factors in the Supporting Information.

**TABLE 1** Means, standard deviations and correlations.

	M(SD)	1	2	3
1. Power	3.43 (0.63)			
2. Confidence	7.57 (0.96)	0.135*		
3. Immoral decisions	0.63 (0.48)	0.083	-0.063	

\* $p = .020$ .

### 3.1.4 | Dependent variable: Immoral decisions

All participants were briefed on the pandemic situation present at the time of the study (February 2021). 'Please read the following situation carefully. The Covid-19 epidemic has broken out and is causing millions of deaths, and millions more are expected to fall victim to the virus in the coming months. For humanity to survive, a vaccine has been developed that eliminates or mitigates the symptoms generated by the virus and that will be administered first to the most vulnerable people (the elderly and those affected by severe illnesses)'. Next, participants were asked the following question: 'Knowing that you are not qualified to be on the list to get the vaccine, would you be willing to include your name on the list and avoid getting sick?' This is a 'sneaking into the queue' paradigm. Basically, participants were offered the possibility of being included in a priority vaccination list even if they were not eligible for the vaccine at that time and were asked to give their permission or decline that possibility and wait for their turn. This measure was adopted from the generic 'cut in line' paradigm previously validated by Paredes et al. (2021, Study 2). Participants were given only two response options, (0) 'I want to wait for my turn' or (1) 'I want to receive the vaccine by jumping the queue' ( $M = 0.62$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ).

## 3.2 | Results

A logistical regression analysis was conducted on immoral decisions using feelings of power (continuous), confidence (continuous) and their interaction as the predictor variables. Table 1 describes the means, standard deviations and correlations between variables.<sup>2</sup>

Main effects and two-way interactions were interpreted in the first and second steps of the analysis, respectively (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). The PROCESS add-on for SPSS was used for testing the two-way interactions (Model 1).

Results showed no main effect of felt power on immoral decisions,  $B = 0.305$ ,  $z = 1.579$ ,  $p = .114$ , 95% CI [-0.073, 0.683]. The effect of confidence on immoral decisions was not significant,  $B = -0.166$ ,  $z = 1.280$ ,  $p = .200$ , 95% CI [-2.349, 2.017].

Of critical importance, the expected two-way interaction between feelings of power and confidence emerged on participants' immoral

decisions,  $B = 0.473$ ,  $z = 2.093$ ,  $p = .036$ , 95% CI [0.0301, 0.9167], Cohen's  $f^2 = .017$ . Among participants reporting higher confidence (+1 SD), a higher sense of power was associated with increased immoral decisions towards vaccines,  $B = 0.748$ ,  $z = 2.567$ ,  $p = .010$ , 95% CI [0.177, 1.319]. In contrast, for participants reporting lower levels of confidence (-1 SD), sense of power was not associated with immoral decisions,  $B = -0.159$ ,  $z = -0.54$ ,  $p = .589$ , 95% CI [-0.735, 0.418].<sup>3</sup> See Table 2 in the Supporting Information for further information on these analyses.

Finally, a complementary analysis with the Johnson-Neyman technique was conducted to show how the slope of power on immoral behaviour varied across the full range of values of confidence. As illustrated in Figure 1, results revealed one region of significance (7.787). That is, when the score in confidence was greater than or equal to 7.787 (52.70%), then greater power was significantly associated with greater immoral behaviour.

## 3.3 | Discussion

This study showed for the first time that confidence further qualified the link between felt power and immoral behaviour. Specifically, for participants reporting higher confidence, feeling relatively high (vs. low) power was associated with increased immoral decisions in the 'sneaking into the queue' paradigm. For those reporting lower confidence, there was a tendency in the opposite direction, such that feelings of high power were associated with less immoral decisions although this effect was not significant.

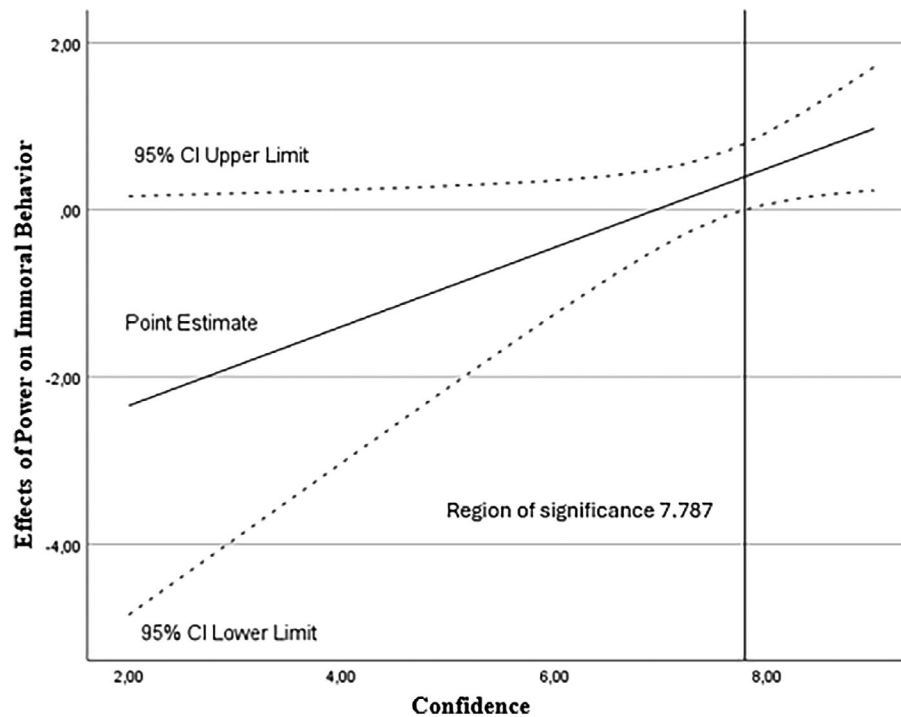
Given that power and confidence were measured rather than manipulated in this first study, there might be some confounding factors co-varying along with both variables. For example, it could be that both feelings of power and confidence depended on a third (unmeasured) variable present in the situation. To address this issue and isolate the effect of power and confidence, we moved to an experimental design. Accordingly, feelings of power and confidence were manipulated in the following study to determine the causal role of these two variables.

## 4 | STUDY 2

This study moved from a correlational to an experimental design. First, feelings of power were manipulated by asking participants to recall a time in which they felt either powerful or powerless. Next, participants were randomly assigned to recall past episodes of confidence or doubt in order to manipulate their confidence. The idea behind this induction is that the confidence felt after recalling those previous experiences

<sup>2</sup> We found a very small positive correlation between the measures of power and confidence,  $r(294) = .135$ ,  $p = .02$ . However, this did not suggest a collinearity issue and it did not affect the results: Tolerance was  $>0.982$  and the variance inflation factor (VIF) was  $<1.019$  for both predictors.

<sup>3</sup> Described differently, across participants feeling high power (+1 SD), confidence was not associated with immoral decisions,  $B = 0.151$ ,  $z = 0.769$ ,  $p = .442$ , 95% CI [-0.234, 0.536]. In contrast, across participants reporting feeling low power (-1 SD), higher confidence was associated with making fewer immoral decisions than lower confidence,  $B = -0.448$ ,  $z = -2.234$ ,  $p = .025$ , 95% CI [-0.841, -0.055]. This suggests that people could also be making immoral decisions when they have doubt about their low power (as if they reasoned that 'I have so many doubts about my low power that I will not try very hard to comply with the norms').



**FIGURE 1** Johnson-Neyman significance regions for Confidence on Power. The y-axis shows the relationship between power and immoral behaviour. The x-axis shows confidence. The 'Point Estimate' is the relationship of power and immoral behaviour for each value of confidence. The CI is the CI around the relationship of power and immoral behaviour for each value of confidence.

can be misattributed to any currently activated mental construct, in this case the induced feelings of power. Participants were then asked to make the same decision regarding vaccines used in Study 1 ('sneaking into the queue' paradigm). High confidence was expected to improve the ability of felt power to predict immoral decisions. Thus, using an experimental rather than correlational approach, we predicted the same main effect and the two-way interaction observed in the first study.

## 4.1 | Methods

### 4.1.1 | Participants and design

A total of 186 undergraduate students (91.9% female,  $M_{age} = 19.92$ ,  $SD = 2.66$ ) participated anonymously in this study in exchange for course credit in March/April 2021, providing their informed consent prior to participating and receiving appropriate ethical treatment. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a Perceived Power (high vs. low)  $\times$  2 Confidence (high vs. low) design. Immoral decisions towards the COVID-19 vaccine were the main dependent variable. Based on the average effect size for the two-way interaction in prior research on power, ease and cheating (Lammers et al., 2017) and the two-way interaction observed in Study 1 (Cohen's  $f^2 = .017$ ), the required sample size for Cohen's  $f^2 = .020$  with a two-tailed test ( $\alpha = .050$ ) considering a .80 power was  $N = 395$  participants.<sup>4</sup> The sam-

ple size ( $N = 186$ ) provided .80 power to detect an interaction effect size larger than Cohen's  $f^2 = .043$ .

### 4.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were notified that they were chosen to participate in a validation study aimed at assessing the viability of future research materials. First, power was manipulated by asking participants to recall a time in which they felt either powerful or powerless. Next, confidence was manipulated to be relatively high or low. Participants were then presented with the same 'sneaking into the queue' paradigm used in Study 1. Finally, they had to answer demographic questions, were thanked and debriefed.

### 4.1.3 | Independent variables

**Perceived power.** Participants completed a power recall task. Specifically, in the high-power condition, participants were asked to list the personal characteristics that made them feel powerful in that situation. Examples of the characteristics listed were: 'ambitious' and 'responsible'. In the low power condition, they were asked to list their personal characteristics that made them feel powerless in that situation. Examples of the characteristics listed were: 'shy' and 'anxious'. The importance of the task was emphasised to all participants, and they were instructed to thoroughly think about their experience. Importantly, participants were asked to stop listing their power-related characteristics

<sup>4</sup> Our original power analysis was biased because of an incorrectly estimated effect in Study 1.

whenever they wanted to keep ease of retrieval constant across power conditions.

**Confidence.** Participants were assigned randomly to a high or low confidence condition. In the high confidence condition, they were asked to remember and describe a past personal episode in which they felt confidence. An example episode from one participant described in the high confidence condition was: *'I recently debated with members of my family about a certain social issue. I was very sure of my position and had full confidence in my arguments. I kept presenting them with facts and data. When they could not contradict what I was telling them, I felt proud and confident'*. In the low confidence condition, they were asked to recall and describe a past personal episode in which they felt doubt. An example episode from one participant described in the low confidence condition was: *'The last exam I took in Data Analysis I was very doubtful of my answers. I have never been good with numbers and that causes me a lot of insecurity. I constantly had doubts'*. Prior research indicates that this manipulation can induce people to erroneously attribute the confidence generated by the recalling task to the mental content activated, even though this content is unrelated to the episode described (Petty et al., 2002; Requero et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2021).

#### 4.1.4 | Dependent variable: Immoral decisions

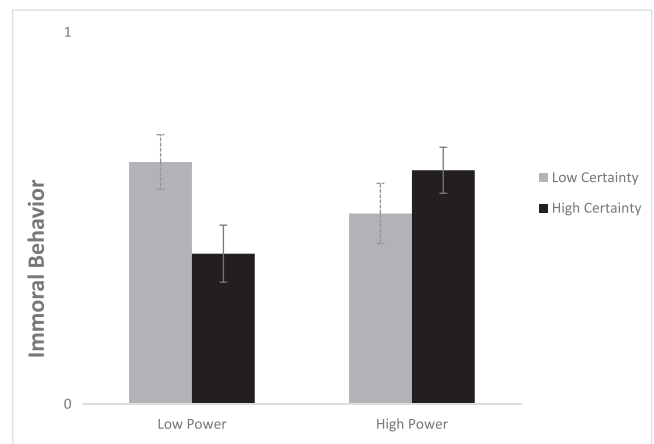
We used the same immoral decision measure as in Study 1. After the description of the Covid-19 situation, participants were given two options, (0) *'I want to wait for my turn'* or (1) *'I want to receive the vaccine by jumping the queue'* ( $M = 0.56$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ).

## 4.2 | Results

A logistical regression analysis was conducted on immoral decisions using feelings of power (1 = high, 0 = low), confidence (1 = high, 0 = low) and their interaction as the predictor variables. Main effects and two-way interactions were interpreted in the first and second steps of the analysis, respectively (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). The PROCESS add-on for SPSS was used for testing the two-way interactions (Model 1).

A main effect of induced power on immoral decisions towards the Covid-19 vaccine was not significant,  $B = 0.249$ ,  $z = 0.832$ ,  $p = .405$ , 95% CI [-0.337, 0.835]. The effect of confidence on immoral decisions was not significant,  $B = -0.222$ ,  $z = 0.735$ ,  $p = .462$ , 95% CI [-0.812, 0.368].

Of critical importance, the expected two-way interaction between induced power and confidence emerged on participants' immoral decisions towards the vaccines,  $B = 1.487$ ,  $z = 2.434$ ,  $p = .015$ , 95% CI [0.289, 2.683], Cohen's  $f^2 = .168$ . As illustrated in Figure 2, among participants assigned to the high confidence condition, high felt power increased immoral decisions towards vaccines,  $B = 0.914$ ,  $z = 2.230$ ,  $p = .026$ , 95% CI [0.111, 1.717]. For participants assigned to the low confidence condition, although not significant,  $B = -0.573$ ,  $z = -1.265$ ,



**FIGURE 2** Immoral decisions as a function of power and confidence. Error bars show  $\pm 1$  SE.

$p = .206$ , 95% CI [-1.460, 0.315], there was a tendency in the opposite direction. That is, high (vs. low) felt power predicted less immoral behaviour.<sup>5</sup> See Table 3 in the Supporting Information for further information on these analyses.

## 4.3 | Discussion

The results of this second study conceptually replicated and extended the pattern of results observed in Study 1. Although there were no main effects of induced power or confidence on immoral decisions when manipulating (rather than measuring) both variables, the results of this study again showed the predicted interaction between felt power and confidence. Across participants assigned to the high confidence condition, induced power predicted more immoral decisions during the pandemic. For those assigned to the low confidence condition, there was a tendency in the opposite direction although the effect was not significant.

An open question worth examining is to what extent these findings would generalise beyond the immoral decisions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, to expand our results beyond this specific context, in the next study we used a general outcome relevant to cheating by assessing actual lying behaviour.

## 5 | STUDY 3

The purpose of the third experiment was to replicate and extend the results from the two previous studies beyond the context of the pandemic, and beyond immoral decisions. Therefore, the key

<sup>5</sup> Described differently, across participants assigned to the high power condition, confidence was not associated with immoral decisions,  $B = 0.477$ ,  $z = 1.150$ ,  $p = .250$ , 95% CI [-0.335, 1.289]. In contrast, across participants assigned to the low power condition, higher confidence predicted making fewer immoral decisions than lower confidence,  $B = -1.009$ ,  $z = -2.251$ ,  $p = .024$ , 95% CI [-1.889, -0.131]. As was the case in Study 1, this could suggest that people could also be making immoral decisions when they have doubt about their low power.

novelty of this study is using a previously validated measure of cheating behaviour that consisted of giving participants the opportunity to lie about their performance to gain money (corrupt behaviour). Thus, instead of asking participants to make hypothetical decisions about vaccination, this study relied on an actual behavioural outcome. This study also introduces some further refinements, both in the experimental inductions and in controlling for potential confounding variables.

First, felt power was induced using a slightly different manipulation in this study. Instead of asking participants to list *personal characteristics* that made them feel powerful or powerless in the past (the induction of Study 2), in this third experiment participant's feelings of power were manipulated with a more traditional induction of power by asking them to recall and describe thoroughly an *experience* in which they had felt powerful or powerless (Galinski et al., 2003). Next, confidence was manipulated to be relatively high or low by using the same manipulation of Study 2. Following these two manipulations, participants were presented with a behavioural measure of cheating, that involved lying about one's performance to gain more money. This measure has been previously validated (Goldsmith & Dhar, 2013; Goldsmith et al. 2018). As will be described, the difference between objective and reported performance served as the measure of cheating behaviour, allowing us to move to a more objective behavioural outcome.

As in Studies 1 and 2, induced feelings of power were expected to predict cheating, extending and generalising previous results to this new outcome. Most relevant, the effect of power was expected to be stronger for those assigned to the high (vs. low) confidence conditions.

## 5.1 | Methods

### 5.1.1 | Participants and design

A total of 333 undergraduate students (82% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.03$ ,  $SD = 3.57$ ) participated anonymously in this study in exchange for course credit in September 2023, providing their informed consent prior to participating and receiving ethical treatment. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 Perceived Power (high vs. low)  $\times$  2 Confidence (high vs. low) design. Actual cheating behaviour was the main dependent variable. Based on the average effect size for the two-way interaction in prior research (Lammers et al., 2017) and in Studies 1 and 2 (average Cohen's  $f^2 = .068$ ), the required sample size for a two-tailed test ( $\alpha = .050$ ) considering a .80 power was  $N = 118$  participants.<sup>6</sup> We exceeded that number by collecting more participants to have the opportunity to detect the predicted effect even if it was smaller than anticipated. Thus, we kept running participants until the end of the second week in which the study was posted, reaching a final sample of 333. We did not start to analyse the data until this stopping rule was met. This sample size provided .80 power to detect an interaction effect size larger than Cohen's  $f^2 = .024$ .

<sup>6</sup> Our original power analysis was biased because of an incorrectly estimated effect in the previous studies.

### 5.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were notified that they were chosen to participate in a validation study aimed at assessing the viability of future research materials. First, felt power was manipulated by asking participants to recall a time in which they either had power over another person or another person had power over them. Next, confidence was manipulated to be relatively high or low following the same induction as the previous study. Participants were then presented with a new cheating paradigm. They had the opportunity to lie about their performance to gain more money. Finally, they had to answer demographic questions, were thanked and debriefed.

### 5.1.3 | Independent variables

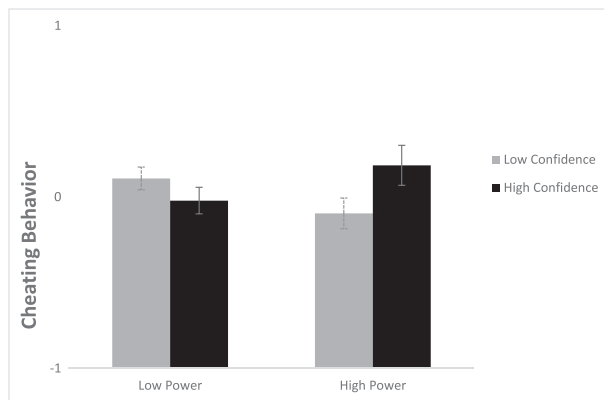
**Perceived power.** Participants completed a power recall task (Galinsky et al., 2003). They were randomly assigned to either a high or low power condition. In the high power condition, they were asked to recall an experience where they had power over another individual or group. Participants in the low power condition had to recall an experience where someone else had power over them. Afterwards all participants were instructed to describe the situation, what happened and their feelings as thoroughly as possible. This method of experimentally manipulating power is widely used for inducing feelings of power (Galinsky et al., 2015). Feelings of power were the primary cognitions of this study. The importance of the task was emphasised to all participants, and they were instructed to thoughtfully describe their experience. Importantly, they only had to recall one experience, that is, ease of recall was constant for all participants.<sup>7</sup>

**Confidence.** Confidence was manipulated using the same induction of Study 2. That is, participants had to recall a past personal episode in which they felt either confidence or doubt.

### 5.1.4 | Dependent variables

**Cheating behaviour.** This measure was introduced as an anagram task adapted from prior research on cheating (e.g. Goldsmith & Dhar, 2013; Goldsmith et al. 2018). For this task, participants were instructed to unscramble a series of Spanish anagrams. They were shown an example ('ATESC') and its correct answer ('CESTA'). This task was designed to be solvable by the majority of participants, regardless of the varying difficulty levels of the anagrams (TABE, CIOIIN, AROUDC, TEPAOL, MALPU). Participants were informed that solving each anagram would earn them 10 entries for a 25€ Amazon voucher. To provide participants with an opportunity to engage in actual cheating and improve their chance to gain the voucher, we used the computer-glitch paradigm (Vohs & Schooler, 2008; Lu et al., 2017). After completing the task, participants received a system failure screen, informing them that the program had a glitch, and the correct answers were not stored

<sup>7</sup> Consult the Supporting Information for further information on ease on this study.



**FIGURE 3** Cheating behaviour as a function of power and confidence. Error bars show  $\pm 1$  SE.

properly in the system. Participants were told to report their performance to receive payment based on their self-reported performance. A cheating index was created by subtracting the number of the real solved anagrams from the number of the solved anagrams that each participant reported. In this way, we were able to assess whether and to what extent the participants had exaggerated their performance.

## 5.2 | Results

**Cheating behaviour.** An ANOVA was conducted on cheating behaviour using feelings of power (1 = high, 0 = low), confidence (1 = high, 0 = low) and their interaction as the predictor variables. The main effect of induced power on cheating behaviour was not significant,  $F(1, 329) = 0.000, p = .992, \eta_p^2 = .000$ , nor was the effect of induced confidence,  $F(1, 329) = 0.716, p = .398, \eta_p^2 = .002$ .

Of most relevance, the expected two-way interaction between felt power and confidence emerged,  $F(1, 329) = 5.261, p = .022, \eta_p^2 = .016$  (Cohen's  $f^2 = .016$ ). As illustrated in Figure 3, among participants assigned to the high confidence condition, the effect of manipulated power on cheating behaviour was in the predicted direction (feeling high power tended to predict more cheating,  $M = 0.18, SD = 0.09, 95\% CI = [0.10, 0.36]$ , than feeling low power,  $M = -0.02, SD = 0.08, 95\% CI = [-0.18, 0.14]$ ) although marginal in significance,  $F(1, 329) = 2.894, p = .090, \eta_p^2 = .009$ . For participants assigned to the low confidence condition, there was a tendency in the opposite direction on cheating behaviour as a function of high ( $M = -0.09, SD = 0.10, 95\% CI = [-0.29, 0.10]$ ) or low power ( $M = 0.11, SD = 0.08, 95\% CI = [-0.06, 0.27]$ ),  $F(1, 329) = 2.407, p = .122, \eta_p^2 = .007$ , although not significant. Participants in the high (vs. low) felt power condition tended to exhibit less cheating behaviour when feeling less confident.<sup>8</sup> See Table 4 in the Supporting Information for further information on these analyses.

<sup>8</sup> Described differently, for participants in the high-power condition, high confidence predicted more cheating behaviour ( $M = 0.18, SD = 0.09, 95\% CI = [0.10, 0.36]$ ) than low confidence ( $M = -0.09, SD = 0.10, 95\% CI = [-0.29, 0.10]$ ),  $F(1, 329) = 4.314, p = .039, \eta_p^2 = .013$ . For participants in the low-power condition, there were no differences in cheating behaviour as a function of high ( $M = -0.02, SD = 0.08, 95\% CI = [-0.18, 0.14]$ ) versus low confidence ( $M = 0.11, SD = 0.08, 95\% CI = [-0.06, 0.27]$ ),  $F(1, 329) = 12.22, p = .270, \eta_p^2 = .004$ .

## 5.3 | Discussion

The results of this third study conceptually replicated and extended the findings of the previous studies by using a well-established power manipulation, and by manipulating confidence, allowing for greater causal control. Although there was no main effect of induced power on cheating behaviour, the predicted interaction between power and confidence was replicated for a well-established behavioural measure of cheating. This third study also allowed us to generalise our findings beyond the pandemic context, from a hypothetical behavioural decision to an actual cheating behaviour.

## 6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Previous studies have identified a link between power and cheating (Boles et al., 2000; Lammers et al., 2010; Carney et al., 2015). The current studies provide convergent evidence to this literature and extend the contribution to a new domain by specifying the conditions in which that effect is more likely to emerge. Although the overall effect of power on cheating did not reach statistical significance in none of the three studies, we found the predicted two-way interaction between felt power and confidence that served to specify when and for whom felt power guides judgements and behaviours in accord with SVT (Briñol & Petty, 2022). Convergent evidence in line with this moderation by confidence approach occurred across topics, including immoral decisions (Study 1 and 2), and actual cheating behaviour (Study 3). We observed the same result regardless of the type of immoral or cheating dependent variable analysed (e.g. a sneaking into the vaccination queue decision during the Covid-19 pandemic in Studies 1 and 2, and actual cheating behaviour about participants' performance, to gain more money in Study 3). The same pattern of results emerged regardless of whether felt power and confidence variables were measured (Study 1) or manipulated (Studies 2 and 3). These results also emerged regardless of the different felt power inductions used in Study 2 (recalling characteristics associated with feeling powerful vs. powerless) and Study 3 (recalling experiences of having power over other people versus experiences of being subject to someone else's power).<sup>9</sup>

Across all of these variations, results showed that felt power (whether measured or manipulated) predicted cheating and immoral behaviour to a greater extent when confidence was high rather than low. Specifically, for participants with high confidence (either measured or manipulated), high felt power predicted an increase in immoral and cheating behaviour in Studies 1 and 2 and was in the predicted direction although not significant in Study 3. For participants who felt low confidence there was a tendency in the opposite direction. That is, high (vs. low) felt power was associated with less immoral behaviour in all three studies. It is worth noting that reversals tendencies emerged in these studies for low confidence conditions. Future research could benefit from investigating what aspects are associated with this

<sup>9</sup> Consult the Supporting Information for additional details on the collapsed data.

invalidation leading to reversals effects. For an extended discussion for when invalidation led to reversals, see Briñol and Petty (2024).

Despite the abundance of research on the effects of power on cheating, the underlying processes have not always been clear. These studies take a moderation approach to testing SVT processes specifying the conditions that help to predict power effects on cheating. Among other implications, these findings suggest that inducing feelings of confidence in people can be beneficial for reducing immoral behaviour or can backfire increasing cheating depending on whether it validates a low or high sense of power, respectively. This is important because many interventions are designed to increase confidence, and the present research reveals that confidence can lead to positive outcomes on cheating in some cases (for low powerful individuals and situations) but have also led to negative outcomes in other cases (high powerful individuals and situations). Based on the current studies, we can conclude that to reduce corruption, we would need to induce confidence in people with low sense of power and doubt in people with high sense of power.

## 6.1 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although we used both a previously validated measure of power and a well-established induction of that variable, it is worth noting that we did not compare individuals in different actual powerful positions. Therefore, future research in this domain can benefit from more ecological approaches to assess power in more natural settings.

Another feature worth mentioning has to do with the composition of our samples. Our samples were composed of many more women than men (Study 1: 91.2%; Study 2: 91.9%; Study 3: 82%). That is often the case in psychology studies using undergraduates given the enrolment patterns. In future research, achieving a sample with a more balanced gender proportion would be desirable. Gender was not found to moderate the results in the current studies (see the Supporting Information for details of these analyses).

Additionally, one might wonder about the implications for corruption given that our sample was composed of students. Although undergraduates typically lack the kind of authority to partake in corruption, defined as the 'misuse of public resources', they can still resort to many unethical behaviours in the context of their formal organisations and beyond. For instance, cheating during exams or assignments are notable. Given that our cheating task used in Study 3 was framed as a 'test', this could be a relevant context with ecological validity. Additionally, undergraduates may engage in practices like plagiarism, bribery for admissions, exchanging money for grades, misappropriation of funds and scholarships, theft of materials such as electronics or other valuables in their classrooms, and even resorting to hacking to alter grades or steal information. Some other practices may include ghostwriting and contract cheating that consists of hiring others to write their essays, assignments, or even entire theses, passing off the work as their own. In fields where research is a significant component of academic work for undergraduates, students may succumb

to the temptation to fabricate or manipulate data to support their hypotheses or conclusions. Students in leadership positions within student organisations or governing bodies may abuse their authority for personal gain, such as embezzling funds allocated for club activities or using their position to secure unfair advantages for themselves or their friends. These examples showcase a range of corrupt practices that can emerge within the academic setting, particularly at the undergraduate level.

Finally, it is important to note that in addition to manipulating confidence and doubt directly as in the present studies, future research can also benefit from manipulating those variables indirectly by varying the validity of the basis of power (e.g. Fast & Chen, 2009; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2006) and by measuring or manipulating whether power is desired or not (e.g. the pleasantness associated with feeling powerful; Chen et al., 2009). Indeed, prior SVT research has found that when the origin of thoughts is perceived as low in validity (Gascó et al., 2018) or as unstable (Luttrell et al., 2016), those thoughts have less impact on subsequent judgement and action. Similarly, one could see that feelings of power that come (or are perceived to come) from illegitimate and/or unstable origins might be less consequential as well (Hays & Goldstein, 2015; Jordan et al., 2011).

## 6.2 | POWER CAN VALIDATE AND BE VALIDATED

In closing, it is important to note that power can play multiple roles with respect to validation processes (see Briñol et al., 2017, for a review). Along with Lammers et al. (2017) research on perceived ease of power memories, the current three studies focused on how confidence can improve the ability of felt power to guide immoral decisions and cheating. However, power can not only serve as an initial cognition to be validated but also as a validating variable of other thoughts because power is associated with pleasantness and confidence. For example, in an experiment by DeMarree et al. (2012), participants were initially induced to either cooperate or compete. Subsequently, they were requested to reflect on their experiences of wielding high or low degrees of power. Following these two inductions, the impact of the initial primes on people's behaviour in two economic decision-making tasks was assessed (Bolton et al., 1998; Berg et al., 1995). Consistent with the idea that power can validate any mental content (Briñol et al., 2007; 2009; DeMarree et al., 2014; Durso et al., 2016), individuals made to feel powerful exhibited more goal congruent behaviour than individuals made to feel powerless. The impact of the primes on behaviour was invalidated to the point that it was eliminated for those in the powerless condition. As noted, power served as the validating variable of initial thoughts in the research by DeMarree et al. (2012) because power was introduced after participants generated their thoughts (see Briñol et al., 2017 for a review on the validating role of power). That is, in those previous cases on self-validation, power served as the secondary cognition validating thoughts unrelated to power, such as primed thoughts about cooperation and competition. However, power, as illustrated for the first time in the current set of studies, can also serve as the primary cognition to then be validated,

and people can vary in the confidence they associate with their feelings of power. Indeed, varying the order of power inductions is a critical aspect to consider when making predictions about the potential effect of this variable (Briñol et al., 2007). For example, in a recent study conducted by Lamprinakos et al. (2024) power was also used as the secondary cognition, and therefore power served as the validating variable (rather than as the validated variable, as in the present studies) of previously induced thoughts about cheating. These authors began by asking participants to generate either positive or negative thoughts about cheating. These cheating-relevant thoughts served as the initial cognition to be validated. Participants were then placed in either high or low power conditions. Therefore, power served as the secondary validating variable. Finally, cheating was measured using different paradigms, such as assessing cheating intentions in relationships. As predicted by SVT, the results revealed that the effect of the direction of the initial thoughts on cheating was greater for participants induced to feel high (vs. low) power. That is, power served as the secondary cognition validating thoughts about cheating. These findings are consistent with previous research on SVT showing that power can validate any thought available in mind unrelated to power, including positive and negative thoughts about persuasive proposals, and thoughts about cooperation and competition (Briñol et al., 2017). Unlike this prior work, the current studies highlight the capacity of felt power to function not only as a secondary cognition, but also as a primary cognition subject to validation. Therefore, power can validate thoughts (when serving as a secondary cognition as in most prior SVT research) or it can be validated (when serving as primary cognition, as in the current studies), leading to multiple outcomes depending on the order of the inductions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (Spain) with Grant Number: PID2020-116651GB-C31.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

For transparency purposes, all materials and data related to this manuscript are available at the following OSF link: [https://osf.io/rtnjq/?view\\_only=c4d4dcd02058419fa905daa6b70d1fd5](https://osf.io/rtnjq/?view_only=c4d4dcd02058419fa905daa6b70d1fd5).

## ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted in adherence to APA guidelines for the ethical treatment of human research samples. The study was approved by the IRB at UAM (Approval code reference was UAM-CEI-120-2426).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**How to cite this article:** Toader, I., Moreno, L., Briñol, P., & Petty, R. E. (2025). Power corrupts and being sure of felt power corrupts even more: Implications for immoral decisions and cheating. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 55, 520–531. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.3099>