UC San Diego

UC San Diego Previously Published Works

Title

The interpersonal nature of power and status

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1hg033jt>

Authors

Smith, PK
Magee, JC

Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.1016/j.cobeha.2015.04.007

Peer reviewed

The Interpersonal Nature of Power and Status

Pamela K. Smith¹, Joe C. Magee²

Addresses

¹University of California San Diego, United States

²New York University, United States

Corresponding Author

Pamela K. Smith (psmith@rady.ucsd.edu)

Abstract

Although social power is typically defined as an interpersonal construct, most empirical studies of power in psychology have not examined interpersonal relationships per se, in contrast to research on social status. This is surprising because both constructs have relational origins. We re-assert the importance of adopting a relational perspective in the study of both power and status and highlight recent research that has implications for this perspective. In our review, we focus on two themes. One involves interpersonal consequences of power and status differences in relationships. The other involves the process of making inferences about others' power and status.

The Interpersonal Nature of Power and Status

Social power and social status are distinct properties of the social world. Social power is understood as asymmetric control over valued resources [1]. It emerges from situations based on the distribution of resources across individuals and the value of those resources. As the balance of control tips to the more powerful, the balance of dependence tips to the less powerful, whose outcomes are more influenced by (i.e., more dependent on) the decisions and actions of the powerful. In contrast, social status is conferred by others. It is the extent to which an individual is held in high esteem and respected by others [1-2].

Research has highlighted the distinction between power and status by emphasizing that power depends critically on what a focal individual has under his or her control, whereas status depends critically on what others think of that individual [1-2]. However, this perspective frames power as a property of the person and elides its interpersonal nature. By definition, power requires the existence of at least one other person. The situation of that other person determines what value the resources take on, whether dependence is asymmetric, and thus whether there is power in the relationship. We want to re-assert that both power and status are phenomena that emerge from relational dynamics between individuals¹ and that analyses of the psychology of power and status must consider the cognitions, emotions, and behavior of all individuals within the relationship.

In keeping with this approach, we focus here on recent research that takes a relational perspective on power and status, particularly research exploring the consequences of power and status differentials for interpersonal relationships and the interpersonal nature of the conferral of

¹ In this way social power and status may be distinguished from related concepts such as personal power which also pertain to an individual's level of control but do not involve a relational context. Though we acknowledge that such types of power exist, they are outside the scope of our review given our present focus on interpersonal effects.

power and status. Our aim is to highlight how a relational perspective enriches our understanding of both power and status and emphasizes the breadth of their effects.

Interpersonal Consequences of Power and Status Differentials

With its emphasis on the relational nature of power, the social distance theory of power [3**] offers insight into how power affects interpersonal relationships. The first principle of the theory is that asymmetric dependence leads to asymmetric experiences of social distance: the high-power individual feels more subjective distance than the low-power individual [4]. For example, high-power individuals are less motivated to affiliate with their low-power counterparts than vice versa. As a result, high-power individuals are less prone to the influence of others than are low-power individuals [5-6] and resist comparing themselves to others [7]. High-power individuals also make cynical attributions for favors they receive from low-power counterparts, even when the power differential occurs within a close relationship [8].

One important consequence of high-power individuals' distancing is that they have less insight into others' thoughts and feelings than do their low-power counterparts and thus tend to misperceive others' intentions and plans [9]. Such reduced interpersonal sensitivity has even been demonstrated at the neural level: when high-power individuals observed the actions of others, they showed reduced motor resonance relative to low-power observers [10]. This can cause problems for powerholders, as their influence is often based on the strength of their alliances. Individuals with more power are more likely to misperceive who is, and is not, a reliable ally, which affects their ability to maintain influence [11]. Powerholders' inattentiveness to others can also have negative consequences for the groups they lead. The confidence exhibited by a powerful person causes others to speak less in group discussions, in part because they interpret that confidence as a sign of competence [12]. This leads more powerful team leaders to

dominate conversations, preventing other team members from communicating and thus diminishing team performance [13*].

Powerholders' social distance emerges in other phenomena that reflect a lack of social connection. Power tends to reduce not only empathic *accuracy* [9] but also empathic *concern* [14]. Relative to low-power individuals, high-power individuals are particularly inspired by their own, but not others', experiences and stories [15]. Power is also associated with more reactance against others' ideas when those ideas impinge on powerholders' sense of freedom, such as when significant others' wish for them to pursue particular goals [16].

In contrast, since status is conferred by others, possessing status orients an individual outward so that high-status individuals are more attentive to others and more likely to take others' perspectives than are low-status individuals [17**-18]. This increased focus on others comes in part because high-status individuals are concerned with maintaining their position in the status hierarchy [1] and such hierarchies may be seen as particularly mutable [19]. For example, because high-status individuals desire to be seen as worthy of others' respect and esteem, higher status is associated with greater fairness and justice towards others [17**]. Such concern with how others perceive them appears to be warranted: high-status individuals indeed draw more attention and are better recalled by perceivers than low-status individuals [20-21].

Although our review has painted a relatively bleak portrait of power, especially as compared to status, recent research has also revealed that individual differences moderate the effects of power on interpersonal cognition and behavior. Individual dispositions and tendencies are a more significant determinant of the behavior of high-power individuals than of low-power individuals across situations [1, 3**, 22]. Thus, among prosocially-oriented individuals, some of the negative interpersonal consequences of power can be eliminated or even reversed.

Individuals' level of prosocial orientation has stronger effects on their empathic accuracy when they are high in power than when they are low in power [23*]. In fact, for individuals high in prosocial orientation, more power is associated with better empathic accuracy. Similarly, a higher moral identity (i.e., the extent to which moral values are central to the self-concept) generally makes individuals less likely to engage in actions that benefit the self at others' expense, but this effect is even stronger for individuals with power [24]. Within romantic relationships, partners who are more self-focused display more impoverished perspective-taking only when they are the more powerful partner in the relationship [25]. By contrast, when individuals have a strong goal to maintain a relationship (i.e., are strongly committed to it), having more power makes them more likely to forgive their partner when that person transgresses against them [26].

Though the distancing nature of power is the root of many of its negative interpersonal consequences, individuals within a hierarchy appear to take this distance for granted and have appropriate expectations for how powerholders will behave. For example, employees are more satisfied and experience more positive outcomes when a powerholder communicates about topics that accurately reflect that person's distance from the employees [27]. In one study at a telecommunications organization, employee job satisfaction was higher when direct supervisors provided specific feedback about day-to-day operations but hierarchically distant leaders shared their broad vision for the organization, compared to vice versa. Thus, high-power individuals need to be aware of their distance from those below them because it affects not only their behavior towards others, but also how these others interpret and react to their behavior.

Taking a relational perspective on power and status reveals that each variable has distinct effects on how people perceive and interact with others around them. In particular, higher power

tends to distance individuals from others, whereas higher status orients individuals toward the needs and concerns of others. This basic relational difference underpins the interpersonal effects of power and status and provides an organizing framework through which we can interpret those effects. It also implies potential pathways for interventions to circumvent some of power's negative interpersonal consequences. For example, explicitly making powerholders more other-focused, such as by having them take another's perspective [28] or by conceptualizing power in an other-oriented way [29], has successfully reversed effects.

Inferences of Power and Status

Among the implications that flow from conceptualizing power and status as phenomena embedded within social relationships, understanding how people interpret others' behavior in terms of power and status becomes as important as understanding what behavior is caused by power and status differences. Relationships and groups tend to suffer when individuals think they have more power or status than they do in the eyes of their partners. For example, when individuals overestimate their power in a group setting, those groups are apt to have more conflict than when there is greater consensus around power, and, in turn, this conflict tends to hamper group performance [30].

A number of factors appear to shape the perception of individuals' power and status, including the trajectory of their recent performance [31], the language they use [32], and expressed emotion [33-34]. One behavioral cue used to make judgments of power is action orientation—the extent to which an individual deliberates before implementation, and the taking of action versus inaction [35]. In one study, leaders were perceived as less powerful the more they deliberated prior to taking action. Similarly, individuals who are more assertive or express more confidence are perceived to be more competent and have higher status [36*-37].

Observers perceiving that the target *chose* to act autonomously is necessary for the inference of power from action: When targets' behavior appeared to be determined by another person, the taking of action was not interpreted as a signal of greater power [35]. Likewise, individuals who behave contrary to observers' expectations or counter to implicit norms in the situation are regarded as more autonomous and thus more powerful and higher status than individuals whose behavior is expectation- or norm-consistent [38-39]. Not only is norm-violating behavior seen as a sign of one's current power, people confer more power and influence to individuals who violate norms, as long as the norm violation appears motivated to benefit others [40].

This type of inference about targets' motivations, particularly whether their behavior is driven primarily by a concern for the self versus others, emerges as an underlying factor in many types of power and status judgments. For example, when individuals are third-party bystanders to a conversation, they use what is said as a clue to infer the parties' concerns and then use this information to reason backward about the parties' power and status [41]. Specifically, in a professional setting, people perceive individuals who talk about others' competence (but not their warmth) as powerful because powerholders are assumed to value this information in their resource allocation decisions. By contrast, people perceive individuals who speak positively about others, in terms of either warmth or competence, as high in status because publicly enhancing others' reputations signals a concern with others' interests. It is notable that these effects mirror the actual differences in self versus other focus for power versus status discussed in the previous section. Indeed, high-status individuals are generally assumed to be warm, whereas high-power individuals are assumed to be relatively cold unless they are also known to be high in status [42].

In groups, status judgments seem to hinge on whose interests are served by a group member's actions. Individuals who make costly contributions to group goals gain status because they are recognized for sacrificing self-interest for the interests of others [43-44]. This effect of self-sacrifice on status conferral generalizes to intergroup contexts, wherein individuals who contribute exclusively to the in-group typically gain status [45].

Given that the mediating process of many status judgments relates to a mental inference about what motivates an individual's behavior, recent research has attempted to trace this mental inference process in the brain. Consider situations in which third-party bystanders try to determine who has higher status in a two-party interaction. One hypothesis is that the process of judging status from social interaction involves an analysis of social interdependence (i.e., inferring whose goals are driving the interaction and who is deferring to whom) and would involve areas of the brain implicated in making inferences about others' mental states [46] (i.e., the "mentalizing" network [47]). Alternatively, judging status can be conceptualized as a more abstract task of ranking people along a hierarchical continuum and thus would involve the intraparietal sulcus (IPS) [48], which is recruited when people rank order objects along a quantitative continuum [49]. Recent work [46] found evidence not only converging with the notion that status judgments involve an abstract ranking process [48] but also that two key regions of the mentalizing network—medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC) and superior temporal sulcus (STS)—are recruited for status judgments. This research did not consider the possibility that the perceiver's status might influence neural activity during a judgment task, but in other studies lower status individuals have shown greater activity in some regions of the mentalizing network when they are processing information related to status [50]. Other researchers using electroencephalography have found enhanced activity among low-status individuals in regions

associated with processing social feedback and evaluation [51].

Conclusions and Future Directions

It is clear that a full understanding of both power and status requires incorporating their interpersonal nature into research. For example, noting that the behaviors affected by power and status are also used as cues by perceivers for determining a target's power and status emphasizes how power and status hierarchies are perpetuated interpersonally [52].

Researchers need to design studies that operationalize power and status as truly relational and dynamic phenomena. For example, most published studies do not manipulate the power of the members of a dyad orthogonally. Rather, either the power level of only one person is specified, or one person is given high power and the other low power. However, such designs neglect the daily reality of individuals interacting with others at their same power level, as well as above or below. Research that has separately manipulated the power of interacting individuals indicates that the power levels of both parties matter for predicting behavior [30, 53]. The interaction of intrapersonal characteristics and relational context represents another promising area for further work on power's effects. Researchers should also consider how the broader social context, such as culture, affects both the consequences [54] and inferences of power and status [55-56]. Finally, it is important to note that the two topics covered in this review, interpersonal consequences and inferences, have been differentially studied in regards to power versus status. Specifically, power research has focused more on its consequences, whereas status research has focused more on its antecedents [2]. Given that a proper understanding of power and status requires knowledge about both, we urge researchers to fill these gaps.

References

[1] Magee JC, Galinsky AD: **Social hierarchy: The self-reinforcing nature of power and status.** *Acad Manag Ann* 2008, **2**:351–398.

[2] Blader SL, Chen Y-R: **What's in a name? Status, power, and other forms of social hierarchy.** In *The Psychology of Social Status*. Edited by Cheng JT, Tracy JL, Anderson C. Springer New York; 2014:71–95.

[3] **Magee JC, Smith PK: **The social distance theory of power.** *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 2013, **17**:158–186.

This review provides an integrative theory of power that uses the interpersonal dynamics of power to explain and predict both its social and its cognitive effects.

[4] Lammers J, Galinsky AD, Gordijn EH, Otten S: **Power increases social distance.** *Soc Psychol Personal Sci* 2012, **3**:282–290.

[5] Galinsky AD, Magee JC, Gruenfeld DH, Whitson JA, Liljenquist KA: **Power reduces the press of the situation: Implications for creativity, conformity, and dissonance.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2008, **95**:1450–1466.

[6] Tost LP, Gino F, Larrick RP: **Power, competitiveness, and advice taking: Why the powerful don't listen.** *Organ Behav Hum Decis Process* 2012, **117**:53–65.

[7] Johnson CS, Lammers J: **The powerful disregard social comparison information.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2012, **48**:329–334.

[8] Inesi ME, Gruenfeld DH, Galinsky AD: **How power corrupts relationships: Cynical attributions for others' generous acts.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2012, **48**:795–803.

[9] Galinsky AD, Magee JC, Inesi ME, Gruenfeld DH: **Power and perspectives not taken.** *Psychol Sci* 2006, **17**:1068–1074.

[10] Hogeveen J, Inzlicht M, Obhi SS: **Power changes how the brain responds to others.** *J Exp Psychol Gen* 2014, **143**:755–762.

[11] Brion S, Anderson C: **The loss of power: How illusions of alliance contribute to powerholders' downfall.** *Organ Behav Hum Decis Process* 2013, **121**:129–139.

[12] Locke CC, Anderson C: **The downside of looking like a leader: Power, nonverbal confidence, and participative decision-making.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2014. in press.

[13] *Tost LP, Gino F, Larrick RP: **When power makes others speechless: The negative impact of leader power on team performance.** *Acad Manag J* 2013, **56**:1465–1486.

This series of studies reveal how formal leaders' behavior is affected by how powerful they feel and how their behavior affects team dynamics and ultimately performance.

[14] Woltin K-A, Corneille O, Yzerbyt VY, Förster J: **Narrowing down to open up for other people's concerns: Empathic concern can be enhanced by inducing detailed processing.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2011, **47**:418–424.

[15] Van Kleef GA, Oveis C, Homan A, van der Löwe I, Keltner D: **Power gets you high: The powerful are more inspired by themselves than by others.** *Soc Psychol Personal Sci* 2015. in press.

[16] Inesi ME, Rios K: **Fighting for independence: Significant others' goals for oneself incite reactance among the powerful.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2013, **49**:1168–1176.

[17] **Blader SL, Chen Y-R: **Differentiating the effects of status and power: A justice perspective.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2012, **102**:994–1014.

This article discusses the distinction between power and status in terms of self versus other focus and reports five studies demonstrating that, as a consequence, power and status have opposing effects on justice behavior.

- [18] Flynn FJ, Reagans RE, Amanatullah ET, Ames DR: **Helping one's way to the top: Self-monitors achieve status by helping others and knowing who helps whom.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2006, **91**:1123–1137.
- [19] Hays NA, Bendersky C: **Not all inequality is created equal: Effects of status versus power hierarchies on competition for upward mobility.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2015. in press.
- [20] Foulsham T, Cheng JT, Tracy JL, Henrich J, Kingstone A: **Gaze allocation in a dynamic situation: Effects of social status and speaking.** *Cognition* 2010, **117**:319–331.
- [21] Ratcliff NJ, Hugenberg K, Shriver ER, Bernstein MJ: **The allure of status: High-status targets are privileged in face processing and memory.** *Personal Soc Psychol Bull* 2011, **37**:1003–1015.
- [22] Keltner D, Gruenfeld DH, Anderson C: **Power, approach, and inhibition.** *Psychol Rev* 2003, **110**:265–284.
- [23] *Côté S, Kraus MW, Cheng BH, Oveis C, van der Löwe I, Lian H, Keltner D: **Social power facilitates the effect of prosocial orientation on empathic accuracy.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2011, **101**:217–232.
- This series of studies reveals that higher power increases the positive effect of prosocial orientation on empathic accuracy. Notably the studies use a broad array of manipulations and measures including a physiological indicator of prosocial orientation.
- [24] DeCelles KA, DeRue DS, Margolis JD, Ceranic TL: **Does power corrupt or enable? When and why power facilitates self-interested behavior.** *J Appl Psychol* 2012, **97**:681–689.
- [25] Gordon AM, Chen S: **Does power help or hurt? The moderating role of self-other focus on power and perspective-taking in romantic relationships.** *Personal Soc Psychol Bull* 2013, **39**:1097–1110.1.
- [26] Karremans JC, Smith PK: **Having the power to forgive: When the experience of power increases interpersonal forgiveness.** *Personal Soc Psychol Bull* 2010, **36**:1010–1023.
- [27] Berson Y, Halevy N: **Hierarchy, leadership, and construal fit.** *J Exp Psychol Appl* 2014, **20**:232–246.
- [28] Galinsky AD, Magee JC, Rus D, Rothman NB, Todd AR: **Acceleration with steering: The synergistic benefits of combining power and perspective-taking.** *Soc Psychol Personal Sci* 2014, **5**:627–635.
- [29] Schmid Mast M, Jonas K, Hall J a: **Give a person power and he or she will show interpersonal sensitivity: The phenomenon and its why and when.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2009, **97**:835–850.
- [30] Greer LL, Caruso HM, Jehn KA: **The bigger they are, the harder they fall: Linking team power, team conflict, and performance.** *Organ Behav Hum Decis Process* 2011, **116**:116–128.
- [31] Pettit NC, Sivanathan N, Gladstone E, Marr JC: **Rising stars and sinking ships: Consequences of status momentum.** *Psychol Sci* 2013, **24**:1579–1584.
- [32] Wakslak CJ, Smith PK, Han A: **Using abstract language signals power.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2014, **107**:41–55.
- [33] Brescoll VL, Uhlmann EL: **Can an angry woman get ahead? Status conferral, gender, and expression of emotion in the workplace.** *Psychol Sci* 2008, **19**:268–275.
- [34] Shariff AF, Tracy JL: **Knowing who's boss: Implicit perceptions of status from the nonverbal expression of pride.** *Emotion* 2009, **9**:631–9.
- [35] Magee JC: **Seeing power in action: The roles of deliberation, implementation, and action in inferences of power.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2009, **45**:1–14.
- [36] *Anderson C, Brion S, Moore DA, Kennedy JA: **A status-enhancement account of**

overconfidence. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2012, **103**:718–735.

This series of studies explores the relationship between confidence and social status. Overconfidence is shown to lead to higher status in part because it leads to behaviors that perceivers read as signs of competence.

[37] Anderson C, Kilduff GJ: **Why do dominant personalities attain influence in face-to-face groups? The competence-signaling effects of trait dominance.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2009, **96**:491–503.

[38] Bellezza S, Gino F, Keinan A: **The red sneakers effect: Inferring status and competence from signals of nonconformity.** *J Consum Res* 2014, **41**:35–54.

[39] Van Kleef GA, Homan AC, Finkenauer C, Gundemir S, Stamkou E: **Breaking the rules to rise to power: How norm violators gain power in the eyes of others.** *Soc Psychol Personal Sci* 2011, **2**:500–507.

[40] Van Kleef GA, Homan AC, Finkenauer C, Blaker NM, Heerdink MW: **Prosocial norm violations fuel power affordance.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2012, **48**:937–942.

[41] Ames DR, Bianchi EC, Magee JC: **Professed impressions: What people say about others affects onlookers' perceptions of speakers' power and warmth.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2010, **46**:152–158.

[42] Fragale AR, Overbeck JR, Neale M a.: **Resources versus respect: Social judgments based on targets' power and status positions.** *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2011, **47**:767–775.

[43] Hardy CL, Van Vugt M: **Nice guys finish first: The competitive altruism hypothesis.** *Personal Soc Psychol Bull* 2006, **32**:1402–1413.

[44] Willer R: **Groups reward individual sacrifice: The status solution to the collective action problem.** *Am Sociol Rev* 2009, **74**:23–43.

[45] Halevy N, Chou EY, Cohen TR, Livingston RW: **Status conferral in intergroup social dilemmas: Behavioral antecedents and consequences of prestige and dominance.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2012, **102**:351–366.

[46] Mason M, Magee JC, Fiske ST: **Neural substrates of social status inference: Roles of medial prefrontal cortex and superior temporal sulcus.** *J Cogn Neurosci* 2014, **26**:1131–1140.

[47] Mitchell JP: **Social psychology as a natural kind.** *Trends Cogn Sci* 2009, **13**:246–51.

[48] Chiao JY: **Neural basis of social status hierarchy across species.** *Curr Opin Neurobiol* 2010, **20**:803–809.

[49] Faillenot I, Decety J, Jeannerod M: **Human brain activity related to the perception of spatial features of objects.** *Neuroimage* 1999, **10**:114–124.

[50] Muscatell KA, Morelli SA, Falk EB, Way BM, Pfeifer JH, Galinsky AD, Lieberman MD, Dapretto M, Eisenberger NI: **Social status modulates neural activity in the mentalizing network.** *Neuroimage* 2012, **60**:1771–1777.

[51] Boksem MAS, Kostermans E, Milivojevic B, De Cremer D: **Social status determines how we monitor and evaluate our performance.** *Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci* 2012, **7**:304–313.

[52] Fiske ST: **Interpersonal stratification: Status, power, and subordination.** In *Handbook of Social Psychology*. Edited by Fiske ST, Gilbert DT, Lindzey G. Wiley; 2010:941–982.

[53] Carr EW, Winkielman P, Oveis C: **Transforming the mirror: Power fundamentally changes facial responding to emotional expressions.** *J Exp Psychol Gen* 2014, **143**:997–1003.

[54] Miyamoto Y: **Culture and analytic versus holistic cognition: Toward multilevel analyses of cultural influences.** *Adv Exp Soc Psychol* 2013, **47**:131–188.

[55] Park LE, Streamer L, Huang L, Galinsky AD: **Stand tall, but don't put your feet up: Universal and culturally-specific effects of expansive postures on power.** *J Exp Soc Psychol*

2013, **49**:965–971.

[56] Torelli CJ, Leslie LM, Stoner JL, Puente R: **Cultural determinants of status: Implications for workplace evaluations and behaviors.** *Organ Behav Hum Decis Process* 2014, **123**:34–48.