

Power and Social Information Processing

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Abstract

We review the scientific evidence concerning the relation between power and social information processing. Does having or obtaining power affect how we perceive and judge our social interaction partners and how accurately we do this? High power individuals perceive others as more agentic and tend to project characteristics of themselves onto others. People in power tend to stereotype others more and see them as less human and generally in a more negative way. Powerholders are not more or less accurate in assessing others; rather, the way they understand their power (as responsibility or opportunity) seems to make the difference: Power as responsibility results in better interpersonal accuracy. Our analysis shows that it is not so much being high or low in power that explains how we perceive others, but rather how we understand our power, whether our high power position is stable, and what our current interaction goals are.

Keywords: Power, status, social perception, stereotypes, interpersonal accuracy

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Power affects powerholders themselves [1-3], how they are perceived by others [4], and how they interact with others [5]. In the present review article, we focus on power and social information processing, meaning on the effect that having or obtaining power has on powerholders' perception and interpretation of social stimuli. Social perception or social information processing is the study of how people form impressions and make inferences about their social interaction partners and whether these inferences are correct [6]. Social relationships can be characterized and classified along two perpendicular dimensions [7, 8]: The horizontal dimension describes interpersonal affiliation, closeness, or liking and the vertical dimension stands for power, control, or dominance. We ask whether being high on the vertical dimension of social relations (e.g., high power, high prestige, high status, or high dominance) [5, 9] affects the way the powerful perceive, judge, and make sense of their social interaction partners, whether they stereotype others more, and whether they perceive others more or less accurately. The purpose of this article is to answer these questions based on the existing empirical evidence to date.

1. How do powerholders see others?

Does having power affect how powerholders perceive their social interaction partners and what are the characteristics a powerholder is most interested in others? The approach/inhibition theory of power [10] suggests that high power individuals focus on rewards, which explains that they are more goal-oriented [11-13]. They might therefore be more interested in qualities of others that benefit goal-attainment. Agency, defined as being active, self-confident, and efficient in attaining goals [14], is such a quality. Indeed, high power individuals more so than low power individuals scrutinize others with respect to agency and prefer more agentic traits and less communal traits in others [15]. This is in line with research showing that powerholders tend to see others as means to an end [16, 17].

Indeed, goal-orientation is linked to the objectification of others [18] and high power individuals are more likely to see their interaction partners as instrumental to their goals [16]. The objectification of others also shows in the fact that high power individuals dehumanize others. When taking drastic decisions concerning others, powerholders tend to dehumanize those affected [19]. In the same vein, high power individuals describe others as less uniquely human [20] and see others in a more negative way whereas they see themselves in a more positive way [17]. This effect was also confirmed in a meta-analysis showing a weighted mean r of .29 between power and negative other-evaluation [21]. The powerholders' negative view of others shows also in that those in power belittle others by perceiving them as smaller [22] and by being less thankful to others for favors obtained, because those others are not seen as acting genuinely [23].

Another aspect of feeling powerful is that powerholders tend to see themselves in others. Given that powerful individuals are more focused on themselves, they anchor their judgments of others in themselves [24, 25]. To illustrate, participants with specific predispositions (i.e., dishonesty or extraversion), perceived social targets more in line with these traits when they were primed with high power as compared to when they were primed with low power. Similarly, high power individuals projected their competence (as opposed to their warmth) onto others [26]. And, when high power individuals judged the emotional states of others, these judgements were in line with the valence of their own emotional states [25]. However, when powerholders see their power position in jeopardy, emotion perception is not simply a projection of the powerholder's own feelings. Illegitimate powerholders are faster at identifying anger in others than legitimate ones [27]. In an instable power position, another person's anger can be seen as a threat, a signal of losing power, which is why illegitimate powerholders might be faster at tracking it.

In sum, research suggests that people who have power perceive others through a lens of how those others can be beneficial for goal-attainment. This makes powerful people see others more as objects or even dehumanize them and evaluate them in a negative way. Also, high power individuals tend to project their traits and states onto others except when their power position is at stake; then, their social perception becomes functional in order to maintain their power (e.g., they are quick at identifying power threat from others via the latter's anger expression).

2. Do powerholders stereotype others?

People are motivated to identify with their in-group [28] and for people pertaining to high-power groups, this serves to keep their power and the privileges associated with their high status position. They should therefore be especially prone to stereotype outgroup members. This is in line with predictions of the Social Distance Theory of Power [29] stating that high power individuals put more distance between themselves and others and that stereotyping increases distance between the in- and the out-group [30].

The Continuum Model of Fiske and Neuberg [31] posits that social perception can be positioned on a continuum: A social interaction partner can be seen in an individualized/personalized way or simply as a representative of a social group (in a stereotypical way). The former would be equated with controlled cognition and the latter with automatic cognition. The approach/inhibition theory of power [10] predicts that power increases automatic social cognition, and powerlessness triggers controlled cognition. Fiske [32] argues that powerful individuals pay less attention to others (because less is at stake for them by ignoring others and because their attention is occupied by other demands) which favors automatic cognition and that is why they perceive others in a stereotypical way. Moreover, having high cognitive demands also puts the powerholder in “automatic cognition” mode, which activates implicit stereotypes [33, 34]. For example, high power individuals

show more automatic negative evaluations towards minority groups (i.e. Blacks and Arabs) [35] and are prone to more implicit stereotyping and prejudice [36]. Also, high power individuals pay more attention to stereotype-consistent information about other people (e.g., time reading adjectives describing a person) [37-39], and particularly to negative stereotype-consistent information and especially when high status individuals feel threatened in their status (e.g., are illegitimate) [40].

In sum, powerholders seem to stereotype others more and maybe more so when their power position is not stable. But, does this mean that they perceive others less accurately as would be suggested by the Continuum Model [31]? The answer to this question is less straightforward than the model suggests.

3. Are the powerful more or less accurate in perceiving others?

Accurate perception of others (interpersonal accuracy) is a vast concept, defined as correctly assessing others' states and traits [41]. Sometimes, the correct recall of others' attributes is included in this definition.

Theoretical predictions state that high power individuals ought to be less accurate in perceiving others for many reasons: (1) because they use stereotypes more and accurate person perception requires paying attention to individuating information [10, 31], (2) because they are not motivated to attend to details differentiating people given that they are in power and have the control of the relevant resources [32], (3) because they have to deal with many subordinates and can therefore not attend to people individually because of cognitive load [32], (4) because they are self-focused and can afford being less interested in others [42], or (5) because power decreases the need to affiliate [43]. Despite the overwhelming number of arguments for why powerful people should be less accurate at assessing others, there are also several reasons for why the powerful might be more interpersonally accurate. For instance, contrary to predictions of the approach/inhibition theory, power has been shown to increase

controlled cognition [44] and to the extent that this is what is needed to accurately assess others, the relation between power and interpersonal accuracy could be reversed. Also, one could argue that obtaining power increases a person's motivation to accurately decode their social interaction partners if they want to be successful in their power position or if they want to preserve their power. Research supports this argument by showing that leaders who are able to correctly assess others' emotions have more satisfied subordinates [45, 46] and obtain better performance ratings by their superiors [46]. Emotion recognition accuracy is related to better political skills, which then explains higher salaries [47]. Moreover, it is possible that people gain high power by using their interpersonal skills, meaning that interpersonal accuracy is an antecedent and not a consequence of power. This could explain why some studies find that people who are higher in a hierarchy in a given organization are more interpersonally accurate [48, 49] and that extraverts with better emotion recognition accuracy are more likely to emerge as leaders in a group [50].

It seems that being accurate in social perception is related to better outcomes for the high power person and his/her interaction partners. But what does the empirical evidence show with respect to the question of whether high or low power individuals are more interpersonally accurate? A meta-analysis [51] addressing the link between power (operationalized as either experimental manipulation such as role play or priming, social class, personality dominance, or achieved rank such as a given hierarchy position in a company) and interpersonal accuracy (operationalized as inferences about targets' traits or states or as recall of information about targets) found no overall effect for inference studies and a positive effect for recall studies, showing that high power people recall more information about others. Moreover, social class was positively related to accurate inferences about others. Maybe recalling more information about others is in line with perceiving others

in an instrumental way in that the powerholder stores the information associated with other people in order to be able to use them for specific goals when needed.

Interestingly, in the aforementioned meta-analysis, there was evidence suggesting that how power was construed, affected the result: Personality dominance assessed as empathic-responsible dominance was positively linked to interpersonal accuracy whereas personality dominance as egoistic-aggressive dominance showed a negative (although not significant) relation to interpersonal accuracy. Sassenberg and colleagues [52] introduced the distinction between power as responsibility (towards others) and power as opportunity (to obtain more resources for oneself) in the realm of corruption. Using their terminology, we suggest that people who understand their power as responsibility have better interpersonal accuracy than people who understand their power as opportunity [53, Study 4].

How power is understood by the powerholder not only affects interpersonal accuracy but also perspective taking [54]. High-*status* individuals engage in more perspective taking than high-*power* individuals [55]. Status refers to how much prestige and respect an individual obtains from others whereas power means the position within a hierarchy [56]. Recently, it has also been suggested that psychological power, or sense of power, entails a sense of responsibility [57]. We see an analogy between power as responsibility and status in that people can only gain high status if they wield their power in a responsible way, in the interest of others. Indeed, research shows that status relates to treating others in a fairer way [58].

To understand the effect of power on interpersonal accuracy, there is more than one aspect of power that needs to be taken into account. Supporting this idea, accuracy in social network perception was not only a function of power, but also of formal (position in a firm's hierarchy) and informal (peer ratings of influence) hierarchical position and personality [59, 60]. And, social dominance orientation affected accurate emotion recognition such that high social dominance individuals were less accurate [61].

In sum, power per se does not seem to explain whether powerholders are accurate or not when perceiving others; rather, how power was conferred or obtained and how it is understood and interpreted by the powerholder determines whether others are seen accurately.

4. Conclusion

The question we need to ask is not how power affects social information processing but rather how the way power is experienced and interpreted by the powerholder and how other aspects such as legitimacy of power affect social perception and judgement. More broadly, the way power affects social perception depends on powerholders' personality and on situational cues and goals. If the powerholder's main concern is goal-attainment, others will be seen through the lens of how they can be useful to attain the goal [16]. If the powerholder's main concern is how to keep his/her power position (e.g., because of feeling illegitimate), others will be seen through the lens of being dangerous competitors [27] or as outgroup members that are stereotyped in order to keep them at bay [40]. If the powerholder's understanding of his/her power position is to feel responsible for others, he/she will become an expert in judging others' states and traits (i.e., interpersonal accuracy). To conclude, more than power per se, these proximal states determine how the powerful perceive their social interaction partners.

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