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FlashReport

The destructive nature of power without status

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ABSTRACT

The current research explores how roles that possess power but lack status influence behavior toward others. Past research has primarily examined the isolated effects of having either power or status, but we propose that power and status interact to affect interpersonal behavior. Based on the notions that a) low-status is threatening and aversive and b) power frees people to act on their internal states and feelings, we hypothesized that power without status fosters demeaning behaviors toward others. To test this idea, we orthogonally manipulated both power and status and gave participants the chance to select activities for their partners to perform. As predicted, individuals in high-power/low-status roles chose more demeaning activities for their partners (e.g., bark like a dog, say “I am filthy”) than did those in any other combination of power and status roles. We discuss how these results clarify, challenge, and advance the existing power and status literatures.

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Introduction

The world was shocked when pictures circulated in 2004 showing low-ranking U.S. soldiers physically and sexually abusing prisoners from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. These inhumane acts were reminiscent of behaviors in the famous Stanford Prison Experiment, a study in which the prison guards so demeaned the prisoners that the study was ended prematurely (Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo, 1973). One could point to these examples as support for the popular idea that “power corrupts.” However, we believe that there is more to the story. Although it is true that the prison guards had power, it is equally true that their roles provided little to no respect and admiration in the eyes of others. They had power but they lacked status. We posit that understanding the combinations of these two variables – power and status – produces key insights into the causes of destructive and demeaning behavior. In the current research, we orthogonally manipulate power and status to examine how these two fundamental aspects of hierarchy combine to drive behavior toward others.

Power (i.e., asymmetric outcome control) and status (i.e., respect and admiration) represent fundamental dimensions of social hierarchy (Magee and Galinsky, 2008; see also Fiske, 2010; Gruenfeld and Tiedens, 2010). Although hierarchy has received vast attention in the social sciences, research has primarily examined the isolated effects of having either power or status. Surprisingly little is known about the interactive effects of these two variables, despite the general consensus that they

are distinct (Magee and Galinsky, 2008) and the prevalence of roles in society that afford power but lack status (e.g., airport security, reimbursement clerks, DMV workers).

Recent work has begun investigating the effects of an actor's power and status on the attitudes and behaviors of observers (Fragale, Overbeck, and Neale, 2011). Here, we focus instead on the actors, testing the hypothesis that filling a role that simultaneously affords power but hinders status increases the propensity to demean and mistreat others.

Power, status, and the tendency to demean

To understand how power and status interact, it is helpful to first examine their isolated effects. Lacking status, by definition, makes people feel disrespected and unappreciated, which can trigger aggressive compensatory behaviors aimed at boosting self-worth (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998; Henry, 2009). Considerable research has suggested that lacking status leads to violence (e.g., Crosby, 1976). For example, children chronically rejected by peers are often aggressive, disruptive, and impulsive (Cillessen, van Ijzendoorn, van Lieshout, and Hartup, 1992; Haselager, Cillessen, Van Lieshout, Riksen-Walraven, and Hartup, 2002; Pettit, Clawson, Dodge, and Bates, 1996). Missing from this work, however, are studies that examine the potentially moderating effect of power.

Power has also been linked to demeaning and aggressive tendencies, with more power leading to more demeaning behavior. Power increases the tendency to denigrate and otherwise harm others (e.g., Georgesen and Harris, 1998; Howard, Blumstein, and Schwartz, 1986; Kipnis, 1976). The approach/inhibition theory of

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power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson, 2003) offers theoretical backing for these effects, indicating that power fosters self-interested behavior by facilitating a sense of entitlement and the pursuit of rewards and goals (Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky, 2010). In contrast, powerless individuals are inhibited (Keltner et al., 2003).

An implication of approach/inhibition theory is that power should lead to action especially when that action aids goal achievement. For example, powerholders objectify others, but only when doing so facilitates goal pursuit (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, and Galinsky, 2008). Other work has also indicated that power amplifies personal inclinations (e.g., Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh, 2001; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, and Liljenquist, 2008). These findings have important implications for research on power and status because they imply that, to the degree that having or lacking status activates a particular goal (e.g., compensating for lower self-worth), power should free one to act on that goal.

Building on these ideas, we propose that individuals who lack status while possessing power may act on the resentment stemming from their lack of respect by demeaning others. That is, the action-facilitating effects of having power will combine with the threatening experience of lacking status to lead low-status powerholders to be particularly likely to demean others. In contrast, other combinations of power and status will be less likely to produce demeaning behaviors, either because such tendencies would not meet a self-relevant goal (for those in a high-status role) or because the actor is not free to act on his or her goals (for those who lack both status and power).

A similar idea is the notion that power paired with self-perceived incompetence fosters aggression (Fast and Chen, 2009). However, whereas Fast and Chen (2009) explored the consequences of self-perceived competence (which is internal to the actor), we investigate the consequences of status in the eyes of others (which is external to the actor). Further, we are interested specifically in status that is derived from one's role, which is distinct from one's own level of competence within that role. To illustrate, although a reimbursement clerk may be highly capable, the position itself may carry little respect or admiration in the eyes of others. Thus, a powerholder may be highly competent and still lack role-based status.

Experiment

To test our hypothesis that having power without status leads individuals to demean others, we assigned participants to high-power or low-power roles that afforded high-status or low-status. We then observed whether participants demanded that their interaction partners engage in demeaning activities.

Pretest

To create a measure of demeaning behavior, we conducted a pretest. We asked 58 undergraduates (60% female, mean age = 20) to evaluate 14 activities. Participants were instructed to imagine being asked to perform each activity and indicate the extent to which they found it to be demeaning, humiliating, degrading, embarrassing, and uncomfortable (1 = "not at all," 7 = "very much"). We averaged participants' responses to create a single demeaning score for each activity (α 's ranged from .71 to .95).

The five most demeaning behaviors were: "say 'I am filthy' 5 times"; "say 'I am not worthy' 5 times"; "bark like a dog 3 times"; "tell the experimenter 3 negative traits that you have"; "count backwards from 500 in increments of 7" ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.19$). The five least demeaning behaviors were: "write a short essay on your experiences yesterday"; "tell the experimenter a funny joke"; "clap your hands 50 times"; "do 5 pushups"; "jump up and down 10 times on one leg" ($M = 2.01$, $SD = .82$). Each of the five activities in the former set was judged by our participants as significantly more demeaning than each of the five activities in the latter set ($F(1,57) > 14.5$, $p < .001$ for all).

Method

Participants were 213 undergraduates (56% female; age: $M = 20.31$).

Manipulation of status and power

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions that orthogonally manipulated role-based status and power. Participants were informed that they were part of a study on virtual organizations and would be interacting with but not meeting a fellow student who worked in the same consulting firm, "Grow Inc." They were assigned to be either the "Idea Producer" or the "Worker." Regardless of condition, participants read descriptions of both roles to ensure that they perceived differences in status and power.

The Idea Producer served as the high-status role. It was described as a role that involved generating and working with important ideas. Furthermore, participants read that a pretest had indicated that "students look up to the Idea Producer role and have a great deal of admiration and respect for it." The Worker served as the low-status role; it was stated that this role involved doing small, menial tasks, such as checking for typos. Furthermore, participants read that a pretest had shown that students "tend to look down on the Worker role and don't have admiration or respect for it."

Next, participants learned that there would be a drawing for a \$50 bonus prize at the end of the study and that, regardless of their role, they would get to dictate what activities their partners must engage in to qualify for the \$50 drawing. In the high-power condition, participants read: "One other element of your role is that you get to dictate what 'hoops' your coworker must jump through in order to qualify for the \$50 bonus drawing which will happen after the study. Thus, you control the amount of effort he/she must exert in order to win the \$50. He/she has no such control over you." In contrast, low-power participants read: "One other element of your role is that you get to dictate what 'hoops' your coworker must jump through in order to qualify for the \$50 bonus drawing which will happen after the study. Thus, you can make him/her put in more effort to win the \$50. However, your coworker has more control over your fate because he/she can remove your name from the raffle if he/she doesn't like the hoops you have selected for him/her to jump through." This approach allowed us to give all participants an opportunity to engage in demeaning behavior toward their partner while simultaneously manipulating how much overall power they had in relation to their partners.

In order to ensure that our power and status manipulations were effective, we included manipulation checks. To assess power, participants indicated whose role afforded more control over access to the \$50 bonus, using a 5-point scale (1 = coworker, 5 = self). To assess status, participants indicated whose role was more admired/respected, using a 5-point scale (1 = coworker, 5 = self).

Demeaning behavior

Participants then received a list of ten activities – the five most and least demeaning activities from the pretest – and selected the behaviors their partner would have to engage in to qualify for the \$50 drawing. They were instructed to check as many boxes as they wanted but that they had to check at least one box. The number of demeaning activities checked (from 0 to 5) served as our measure of demeaning behavior.

Results

Demeaning behavior was correlated with age ($r = .13$, $p = .05$). In addition, men ($M = 1.01$, $SD = 1.21$) were more demeaning than women ($M = 0.72$, $SD = 0.92$), $t(209) = 1.99$, $p = .047$. We conducted all analyses with and without controlling for these variables and observed the same effects; thus, we do not discuss these variables further.

Manipulation checks

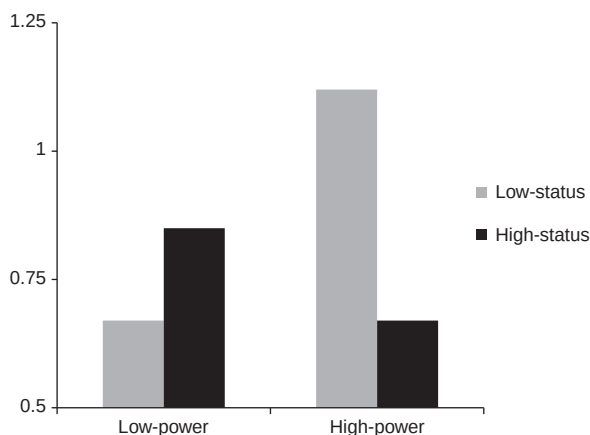
Our manipulations were effective. We observed a significant effect of the power manipulation on perceived power; high-power participants perceived more power ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.86$) than low-power participants ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(211) = 15.92$, $p < .001$. There was no main effect of status on perceived power, $t(211) = 0.68$, $p = .50$. Status and power manipulations did not interact to predict perceived power, $F(1, 213) = 2.60$, $p = .11$.

The status manipulation had a strong effect on perceived status; those in the high-status condition perceived that their roles afforded more status ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.93$) than those in the low-status condition ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(211) = 21.28$, $p < .001$. The power manipulation had no effect on perceived status, $t(211) = 0.23$, $p = .82$, and there was no interaction between the power and status manipulations, $F(1, 213) = .25$, $p = .62$.

Demeaning behavior

A two-way ANOVA revealed, as hypothesized, a significant Status $\times$ Power interaction: $F(1, 213) = 4.64$, $p = .03$. Individuals in high-power/low-status roles selected more demeaning behaviors for their partners to engage in ($M = 1.12$, $SD = 1.34$) relative to those in high-power/high-status roles ($M = 0.67$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(111) = 2.16$, $p = .03$. In contrast, among low-power participants, status had no effect, $t(98) = 0.88$, $p = .38$. Further analyses revealed that participants in the high-power/low-status condition were significantly more demeaning in their behavior than those in the other three conditions, $t(209) = 2.38$, $p = .02$ (see Fig. 1); no other conditions were different from the others $t(209) < 1.27$, p 's $> .20$.

In contrast to these effects, there was no interaction of power and status on the number of non-demeaning activities selected, $F(1, 213) = 1.23$, $p = .27$. The only effect to emerge with regard to the non-demeaning activities was that low-power participants selected more of the non-demeaning activities ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.36$) than did high-power participants ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(211) = 2.11$, $p = .04$. It is possible that low-power participants chose more non-demeaning activities in order to stay in the lottery. However, it is unclear why they would not simply select fewer activities altogether. Furthermore, this possibility does not explain the moderating effect of status in the high-power condition. Rather, the pattern of results is consistent with our theorizing as well as with Keltner et al.'s (2003) assertion that the powerless must often inhibit their desires in order to avoid negative consequences.



Note: Participants in the high-power/low-status condition selected more demeaning tasks for their partners to complete than those in the other three conditions, $t(209) = 2.38$, $p = .02$. No other conditions were different from the others $t(209) < 1.27$, p 's $> .20$.

Fig. 1. Effects of power and status on demeaning behavior.

Discussion

Supporting our predictions, the combination of high-power and low-status led to more demeaning tendencies than any other combination of power and status. These findings advance theoretical understanding of social hierarchies by demonstrating that power and status interact to produce effects that cannot be fully explained by studying only one or the other basis of hierarchy.

We have suggested that low-status individuals are more motivated than high-status individuals to demean others, and that power frees them to do so. Future research should explore the precise mechanisms that drive the demeaning effects of having power without status presented here. This motivation to demean could stem from the negative feelings associated with failing to be seen positively by others (Leary and Baumeister, 2000) and be aimed at boosting feelings of relative self-worth (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998). It is also possible that low-status individuals are motivated to demean others in order to meet their need to view the world as a balanced and just place (Kay and Jost, 2003). These and other possibilities should be explored. It would also be interesting to assess whether informal status (i.e., status based on the person, rather than the role) leads to the same patterns as role-based status.

Although we observed support for the idea that low-status powerholders tend to demean others, it is possible to identify people in such positions that treat others positively. This hints at possible moderators of the effect observed in our experiment. First, perhaps showering low-status powerholders with flattery and/or respect assuages negative feelings about their low-status roles and leads to them to treat others positively. This possibility offers insight into why people often tiptoe around or come bearing gifts for low-status powerholders: they want to avoid being demeaned and obstructed. Opportunities for advancement might also eliminate demeaning tendencies; if the individual has the opportunity to advance, he or she might treat others well in the pursuit of such advancement. Personality traits, such as agreeableness, could also produce positive treatment of others, even when in high-power, low-status roles. On the other hand, potential enhancers of demeaning effects might include dispositional traits such as neuroticism or narcissism.

Conclusion

In the Introduction, we mentioned the demeaning behaviors committed by U.S. soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The present findings suggest that the possession of power in the absence of status may have contributed to these deplorable acts. Furthermore, our results offer a fresh perspective on the insights that emerged from the classic Stanford Prison Experiment. Perhaps the prison guards mistreated and humiliated the prisoners not because they were powerful per se but because, despite their power, they felt a lack of respect and admiration from their charges. Our findings indicate that the experience of having power without status, whether as a member of the military or a college student participating in an experiment, may be a catalyst for producing demeaning behaviors that can destroy relationships and impede goodwill.

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