

What power does to you – the psychological consequences of power



We often blame the behaviours of those who have power and abuse it on the individual and his or her personality. That is, we make what psychologists call a dispositional attribution. But there is more to individual and personality differences when it comes to understanding the behaviour of those in power. In fact, what is often occulted are the very consequences that power has on self-perception and various aspects of our psychological functioning.

Let's start by looking at the way psychologists define power. Psychologists define power in multiple ways, but commonly accepted definitions converge towards two aspects of power. First, a powerful person is one that has control over their own and others' resources. Resources can take many forms (e.g. financial resources, or in a more primitive sense, land or food...) but can also be symbolic resources (e.g. recognition, status...). Second, someone can be said to be powerful when she / he has the capacity to influence someone else, and stay uninfluenced by others. Following the work of French and Raven (1959), influence can as well come in multiple forms. For instance, one can exert influence based on expertise, charisma, or by simply being able to grant someone a promotion.

Acquiring power comes with a series of psychological consequences. The process of acquiring power can be gradual (climbing through the hierarchy of a multinational corporation) or sudden (e.g. becoming king with the sudden death of the incumbent), The first series of consequences take place on the way power holders process information from their surroundings. Research suggests that individuals get less distracted by peripheral information when asked to focus on tasks. They also tend to become more focused on their own internal states and emotions, and less on those of others.

But some of the most compelling research evidence that power affects the way we function psychologically comes from the work of Galinsky on power and perspective taking. In a cleverly designed experiment, Galinsky put participants in a position where they were either feeling powerful or less powerful. He then asked them to draw a letter on their forehead, and looked at whether the drawn letter was from the perspective of the person writing the letter (i.e. first-person perspective, or no-perspective taking) or the perspective of the experimenter (i.e. third-person perspective or perspective taking).

Results suggest that individuals in a powerful condition were less likely to draw a letter that was readable by their partner, thus suggesting that power reduces the capacity to take the perspective of the other. The effect of power goes beyond perspective taking, and research suggests that power leads people to use more stereotypes and increase the objectification of others.

Finally, in research conducted with LSE colleague professor Tom Reader, we showed that power increased one's sense of uniqueness and feeling different from others for both men and women. Interestingly, it also decreased the sense of connectedness that men have with others, while it increases that sense in women.

The effect of power goes beyond the way we process information. Power has also been shown to affect the experience of emotions. For instance, research suggests that people who lack power become more attuned to others' emotions, especially when living in the same physical space. Powerful individuals, on the other hand, tend to pay less attention to the emotions of others. They are capable of influencing the emotions of others, and tend to make emotional displays only when they really experience emotions (e.g. smiling when they really experience smiling). And generally speaking, powerful persons experience more positive emotions and fewer negative ones.

The last area of human psychology that is affected by power is the type of behaviours people engage in. Research suggests that power makes us more susceptible to being proactive and making the first move (for instance, in negotiations). Power-holders are also more likely to engage in socially unacceptable behaviours, such as the display of poor table manners.

Altogether, psychological research suggests that power creates conditions that can be favourable to behaviours such as sexual harassment in the workplace. It is important to state that the link between power and negative behaviours is by no means an automatic one. What is possible is that power triggers inappropriate behaviours among those who already have a tendency to behave in a certain way. Research by Bargh and colleagues (1995) suggests that men with a strong tendency to harass are also more likely to make automatic associations between power and sexual thoughts.

How can psychological research contribute to the prevention of sexual harassment? First, by making those in power aware of the negative consequences of power. Second, by training and developing those in power to exert more empathy – *cum patere*, the Latin root of empathy, means 'suffer with'. As research shows that power diminishes one's capacity to take the perspective of others and perceive emotions accurately, training power holders to reconnect with others can be a way to offset the negative consequences of power.



Notes:

- Benjamin Voyer spoke in the event [Power at Play: tackling harassment in the workplace](#), hosted by the Department of Management LSE Women in Business lecture series, with Allyson Zimmermann (executive director of Catalyst Europe) and Sarah Ashwin (professor of comparative employment relations at LSE).
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