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Powerful perceivers, powerless objects: Flexibility of powerholders' social attention ☆

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Abstract

We argue that the effect of power on social attention is a function of flexible, instrumental information processing that allows the high power perceiver to attain situation specific goals using whatever means are available, including attention. Study 1 assigned powerful participants to more "people-centered" or more "product-centered" goals, and found that people-centered powerholders better individuated low-power targets. Study 2 examined responses by both high- and low-power organization members, and found powerful judges more responsive to organizational goals in setting priorities and using information about the organization than powerless judges. Together, these results suggest that powerholders use social attention, like other resources, in order to advance their ability to fulfill organizational goals.

Keywords: Power; Social attention; Individuation; Stereotyping; Subject; Object; Instrumentality; Goals

In the American version of the sitcom *The Office*, the boss arranges a recognition party for his staff, to bolster morale. Through an endless-seeming evening, he doles out awards based on stereotypes (the Indian-American employee gets an otherwise-unexplained "Curry Award") and limited, outdated information about employees (he debates giving his receptionist a "Longest Engagement" award for the third or fourth consecutive year). The employees groan and suffer, but clearly none are surprised. Despite his efforts to deliver individual recognition, the boss is unaware of who his employees are as individuals. He has little insight into their skills and contributions, let alone their concerns or their personalities. Like a Dilbert cartoon, the episode derives humor from a sadly common experience: that the boss is oblivious to those around him.

How do the powerful pay attention to others? According to the cynical view depicted in *The Office*, not well. On the other hand, perhaps in real organizations powerholders do pay attention to others well, knowing that such attention can yield benefits that might help to maintain or even increase their power.

The basic research on this topic has leaned strongly toward the former perspective: that power leads people to stereotype others and to pay careless social attention characterized by cognitive laziness and shortcuts (DeDreu & Van Kleef, 2004; Ebenbach & Keltner, 1998; Fiske, 1993; Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Keltner & Robinson, 1997; Rodriguez-Bailon, Moya, & Yzerbyt, 2000).

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This research, whose basic arguments and implications are outlined in Table 1, is most often conducted by social psychologists, and published in psychology journals. Its strongest proponents are Fiske and colleagues (Fiske, 1993; Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Goodwin et al., 2000) and Keltner et al. (2003), who argue that power should be associated with careless processing for a number of reasons.

Fiske (1993) points out that there is usually a one-to-many ratio of powerholders to subordinates, and thus the powerholders' cognitive load is much higher, and precludes careful attention. Powerholders' outcomes are not dependent on the powerless, and so there is little external inducement to attend. Finally, people with dominant personalities are simultaneously more likely to pay careless attention to others, and drawn to positions of structural power. As an example, Fiske cites the Jacksonville Shipyards case, in which a traditionally male workplace was integrated by gender. The entering women were confronted by a hostile work environment in which they were stereotyped and otherwise ignored, Fiske argues, because the men did not feel they needed anything from the women's presence. Managers, who could potentially have remedied the situation, were attentionally overloaded and found it easy to dismiss individual women's complaints as unimportant annoyances. Because of these factors, the hostile environment persisted at least until court decisions mandated otherwise.

Keltner et al. (2003) echo this argument, and extend it by saying that power instills a tendency to approach behavioral rewards. Powerholders will attend to objects that promise the potential for reward, and because powerless people in the environment offer little reward, they get little attention. Further, powerful people tend to have more positive affect—a psychological state associated with more careless cognition—and so may be even more likely to follow the motivational pattern.

A few psychologists have worked to establish boundary conditions for these findings (Overbeck & Park, 2001; Vescio, Snyder, & Butz, 2003), identifying situational variables that seem to moderate whether powerful people's attention is careful. In general, this work has found that power is associated with the active use of attention, and that powerholders can be careful attenders or more stereotype-bound attenders, depending on their expectations and responsibilities. For example, Overbeck and Park (2001) argued that powerholders in organizations feel a greater sense of responsibility for good performance. To the extent that the targets of responsibility are altered, attention will follow.

In the current work, we hope to challenge what seems to be a strongly prevailing notion from the social psychological literature, by integrating work from that literature with organizational behavior theories and observations. Theorists of management and organizational behavior have crafted models of power use in organizations (generally under the heading of *leadership*) that would seem to require effective use of attention (e.g., Wilemon & Cicero, 1970; Yukl, 1989). Organizational powerholders must solve problems and make decisions regarding people (Hollander, 1978); form coalitions, in part by responding to other people's concerns and developing relationships with them (Kanter, 1983; Kaplan, 1986); display not only task-oriented behavior, but also relationship-oriented behavior, according to situational demands (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Fleishman, 1953; Halpin & Winer, 1957; Hill, 1969; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, & Snoelk, 1964); respond to human as well as task concerns (Blake & Mouton, 1982; Conger & Kanungo, 1987); and interpret performance information about subordinates (Green & Mitchell, 1979) All of these processes, it would seem, should demand the competent use of attention—in particular, flexible attention directed toward objects that help fulfill the organization's goals.

Although the OB arguments are compelling, empirical testing has generally been restricted to evaluation of general leadership models and broad managerial activities. As such, specific implications of these theories for social attention have not been tested to the same extent as the powerholder-as-poor-attender perspective. The current paper seeks to integrate across the two literatures by testing a more inclusive, integrative view of power and social attention.

Keltner et al. (2003) have suggested that power is associated with a set of approach-related affects and behaviors; in short, power reflects an "action orientation" in which the powerful are thought to pursue opportunities and benefits in their immediate environments. On the other hand, low power is associated with general affective and behavioral inhibition; the powerless are thought to be vigilant for threats in the environment, and to strive to avoid these threats. This approach-inhibition model posits that powerholders will tend to favor action over inaction in virtually all cases. For example, Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee (2003) demonstrated convincingly that powerholders will act to serve their own comfort, to advance their own concerns, *and* to benefit the group at large. In short, powerholders in their study pursued whatever behavioral option was the most *action*-oriented, shunning the passive.

As stated, Keltner et al. (2003) argue that power is associated with heuristic processing of information about other people. In particular, they argue that power is associated with inattention to low-power people and their concerns. Viewed more broadly, however, Keltner et al. can be seen as arguing for a more inclusive story about how power might affect social attention. The theory of action orientation suggests that powerholders, more than others, are predisposed to act and to approach. Likewise, Deschamps (1982) demonstrated that people with power assume and are granted the role