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Seeing power in action: The roles of deliberation, implementation, and action in inferences of power

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ABSTRACT

Six experiments investigate the hypothesis that social targets who display a greater action orientation are perceived as having more power (i.e., more control, less dependence, and more influence) than less action-oriented targets. I find evidence that this inference pattern is based on the pervasive belief that individuals with more power experience less constraint and have a greater capacity to act according to their own volition. Observers infer that targets have more power and influence when they exhibit more implementation than deliberation in the process of making decisions in their personal lives (Study 1a), in a public policy context (Study 1b), and in small groups (Study 2). In an organizational context, observers infer that a target who votes for a policy to change from the status quo has more power than a target who votes not to change from the status quo (Study 3). People also infer greater intra-organizational power and higher hierarchical rank in targets who take physical action toward a personal goal than in those who do not (Studies 4–5).

Hierarchy pervades social life (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Wright, 1994), and in navigating the social world, individuals try to make sense of the influence that others have over their personal and professional lives (Ellyson & Dovidio, 1985; Goffman, 1957; Krackhardt, 1990). To figure out just how much power people have, individuals often look to symbols of status. Material possessions, sex, race, education, and job titles all provide useful clues, but not perfect information, about others' capacity to influence important outcomes (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Berger, Ridgeway, Fisek, & Norman, 1998; Domhoff, 1998; Henley, 1977; Pfeffer, 1992; Weber, 1947). Some observable behaviors seem to imply the possession of power, almost by definition. Loaning money, giving orders, and barring entry all involve giving rewards or meting out punishments based on controlling access to resources (Goldhamer & Shils, 1939; for related definitions of power, see Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), and people's ratings of a group member's power are positively related to the number of attempts he or she makes to influence the group (Levinger, 1959; Lippitt, Polansky, & Rosen, 1952). These represent easy cases for lay people to determine degrees of others' power; however, most behavior does not so clearly reveal who has power and influence.

People attend to numerous subtle verbal and nonverbal behaviors when making judgments about individuals' positions in social hierarchies. Individuals who make external attributions for their actions suggest to others that they do not have control over their environment, which, in turn, implies that they do not have power (Lee & Tiedens, 2001). People who speak earlier to their interaction partners (for a review, see Hollander, 1985), speak more about the focal task (Bales, Strodtbeck, Mills, & Roseborough, 1951), and interrupt more frequently and hesitate less when they speak (for a review, see Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005) are thought to have more influential positions in groups. Emotionally and physically expressive behavior can be interpreted as a signal of power as well. People tend to judge expressed anger (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992; Tiedens, 2001) and more postural expansion, bodily shifting, and gesturing as indicative of elevated hierarchical standing (for a review, see Hall et al., 2005). Also, observers infer that individuals who initiate touching their interaction partners are more powerful than those who either reciprocate or do not reciprocate others' touch (Goldberg & Katz, 1990; Major & Heslin, 1982; Summerhayes & Suchner, 1978).

One way to interpret much of this previous research is that, whereas taking action and generating activity convey power, inactivity conveys powerlessness. For example, influence attempts, interruptions, and touching others all involve action, and anger is an emotion associated with a tendency to take action against the anger's cause (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). These results suggest that a more general phenomenon may be at work: observers infer an actor's level of power based on his or her orientation toward action, both in social interaction and in approaching personal and organizational goals. According to this hypothesis, observers infer that individuals who exhibit a greater action orientation have more power than individuals who are less action-oriented.

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The current research investigates the process by which lay observers make action orientation-based inferences of targets' power. Before examining this hypothesis and explaining how and why these action orientation-based inferences of power might be made, the central constructs in this research are described in detail below.

Definition of constructs

Action orientation

Gollwitzer and colleagues (Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Steller, 1990; Gollwitzer & Kinney, 1989) point out that, prior to taking action, individuals focus on two sequentially ordered processes. The first process involves *deliberative* thinking, in which an individual chooses a goal from a selection of multiple potential goals. During deliberation, one weighs the pros and cons of different options before choosing which goal to pursue. Extensive deliberation inhibits goal selection and, ultimately, action. To move closer to action, an individual must select a goal and then engage in the next process, characterized by *implemental* thinking, which involves planning the actions that are necessary to reach the chosen goal. The implemental process typically ends with a commitment to take *action* (Brandstätter, Lengfelder, & Gollwitzer, 2001). As individuals move along this continuum from deliberation to implemental thinking and from implemental thinking to action, they can be seen by observers as more action-oriented (see Diefendorff, Hall, Lord, & Strean, 2000 and Kuhl, 1994 for a related distinction).

For purposes of the current research, individuals are more *action-oriented* in the eyes of observers when they display a relative emphasis on implementation over deliberation and action over inaction. People show varying degrees of an action orientation depending on the relative amount of time they spend on deliberation and implementation in their own thinking. In group settings, the emphasis one places on these two processes signals one's action orientation. Observers can see signs of action orientation in the behavior of the targets they observe: individuals who demonstrate a tendency to swiftly make decisions, make a strong commitment to a course of action, or change from the status quo appear more action-oriented than individuals who have more deliberative tendencies or who refrain from taking action or changing the status quo.

Action orientation has been linked to power in previous research finding that power facilitates goal pursuit (Guinote, 2007) and the taking of action (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). Yet, within previous studies on inferences of power, none has directly tested whether observers use targets' action orientation in inferences of targets' power.

Power

Although the present research is concerned with social observers' subjective inferences of power, the measures include a number of features central to definitions of power. One important feature is that people are dependent on each other for social and material resources. This creates asymmetrical outcome dependence in social relationships: one person (one with more power) is less dependent on another person than vice versa (Emerson, 1962; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). A result of this outcome dependence, power corresponds to the capacity to control others' outcomes (Dépret & Fiske, 1993; Fiske, 1993; French & Raven, 1959; Keltner et al., 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In general, the more power one possesses vis-a-vis others, the more influence one has over them (Dahl, 1957; Goldhamer & Shils, 1939; Russell, 1938).

Power, in the terms described above, is situationally sensitive; dependence and control relative to others can vary depending on the parties or the resources involved. Typically, this is correlated with hierarchical rank, which is invariant across situations within a hierarchy. For example, supervisors are less dependent on subordinates than subordinates are on supervisors, and supervisors control subordinates more than subordinates control supervisors. However, power differences can also exist among employees at the same level of the organization when, for example, one depends disproportionately on another for advice, referrals, or emotional support.

The current research is concerned with the extent to which observers think an actor has power (their subjective inferences) rather than the objective level of power that an actor actually has in a given situation. Observers can infer individuals' power based on their observable behavior. Absent specific knowledge of dependence and control, for example, observers might see implementation as representative of more power than deliberation over a decision. Likewise, without knowledge of an actor's formal hierarchical rank, observers can infer his or her rank based on behavior. For example, observers might infer that someone who changes the environment to remove aversive stimuli is more likely to occupy a supervisory position than someone who makes no such change. The accuracy of these subjective inferences is beyond the scope of this research.

Inferring power from action orientation

Why would a pattern of inferences about power develop based on action orientation? The studies reviewed above, which investigated touching behavior and perceived power (Goldberg & Katz, 1990; Major & Heslin, 1982; Summerhayes & Suchner, 1978), provide a useful example to consider. One's touching of another individual might indicate to observers that one can act according to one's own volition, whereas reciprocation implies that the initiator's actions determine one's own behavior. This suggests that the apparent volitional nature of a target's behavior can be used by observers as an indication of his or her level of power. After all, there is a widespread belief that power-holders experience less constraint than others (Overbeck, Tiedens, & Brion, 2006) and, therefore, are able to take more action in service of their goals than the powerless. Thus, people might develop a mental association between power and the capacity to act according to one's own volition, which operates implicitly when people make inferences about power based on action orientation. The following studies are designed to investigate whether people use a target individual's action orientation to determine his or her level of power and whether this inference process is based on the proposed mental association between power and the capacity for volitional action.

Overview

The primary goal of these studies is to document the causal relationship between a target's action orientation and observers' inferences of his or her power across a variety of contexts. These studies explore multiple facets of action orientation, and although the particular methods vary from study to study, the result that they all share in common is that observers infer greater power in individuals whose behavior is more action-oriented. Studies 1a–b investigate whether social targets appear to have more power when they exhibit implemental planning as opposed to deliberation about private and public policy decisions. Study 2 uses an interactive group decision-making context to illustrate the importance of implementation and deliberation relative to myriad other features of the situation when people make inferences of group members' power. Study 3 explores whether people infer that someone who votes for a policy that changes the status quo is more powerful than someone who votes not to change the status