The Influences of Social Power on Social and Physical Distance

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Powerful individuals, relative to powerless ones are motivated to be close to the person over whom they have power but distant from people in general others. This difference is reflected in both the physical distance from others at which sit, conformity behavior, and the willingness to give and receive gifts.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Social power refers to the ability to control others’ resources and outcomes (e.g., Fiske, 1993). However, there is a metaphorical relationship between social power and social distance. This relation is often conveyed symbolically. When a picture of a company hierarchy is drawn, for example, the CEO is at the top, with less powerful individuals at increasing distances away. This relationship may extend to physical distance as well. Construal level theory (e.g., Liberman, Trope and Wakslak, 2007) suggests that activating concepts of distance along one dimension can potentially influence judgments and overt behavior along other dimensions of distance to which these concepts are metaphorically related. The present research examined implications of this possibility.

The notion that “power equals distance” pervades many societies. Socially powerful individuals typically possess substantial material/social resources and do not need to depend on others for survival. Therefore, they may be disposed to see themselves as separate and distinctive. By the same token, individuals with little power are more likely to depend on others to survive. Consequently, they are more likely to be motivated to maintain social closeness to others. These differences in social distance could generalize to physical distances.

This relation may not hold for the particular individuals involved in a power relationship. Powerful people might be motivated to be close to their powerless counterparts in order to successfully exert their influence, whereas low-power individuals might resist being influenced against their will and find others’ imposition on them to be aversive. To this extent, they may be motivated to keep distance from those who have power over them. This, therefore, leads to our main hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 People who perceive themselves to have high power in a particular relationship will judge themselves to be closer to the other person involved in this relationship, but more distant from people in general, than people who perceive themselves to have low power.

Three studies examined the possibility. In one study, participants wrote about a personal experience in which they either had power over another or another had power over them. Then, they indicated both how close they felt to the other person in the situation they recalled and to other college students in general (adopted from Aron, Aron and Smollan, 1992). Participants perceived their distance from the person they wrote about to be less, but their distance from people in general to be greater, when they had written about a powerful experience than when they had described a powerless experience. Furthermore, they showed less willingness to conform to others’ product preferences in the former condition than in the latter.

Finally, people’s perceptions of their social distance from others may affect their subsequent behavior. We examined this possibility under a gift-exchange situation. Gift-giving has been interpreted as a confirmation of the giver’s desire to establish a connection to the recipient (Sherry, 1983). When accepting a gift, however, people may take reciprocity norms into consideration and feel indebted if they accept a gift from someone they feel close to (Shen, Wan and Wyer, 2011). Therefore, we hypothesized that people who perceived themselves to be close to another would be more willing to give than to accept a gift, whereas people who perceived themselves to be distant from others might show the reverse pattern.

In a third study, participants first completed the same power-manipulation task employed in other studies. Then, they were asked to imagine a situation in which they shared a taxi with either (a) the person they recalled interacting with in the power-manipulation task or (b) a casual acquaintance. Finally, some participants indicated the likelihood that they would accept the other’s offer to pay the fare for both of them, whereas others estimated the likelihood that they would personally offer to pay the fare for both of them. As expected, participants were more willing to offer to pay the fare for the person they had written about, but were less willing to accept the other’s offer to pay, if they had had power over this person than if the person had had power over them. However, priming feelings of power slightly decreased their willingness to pay for a casual acquaintance, but increased their willingness to accept an offer from this person, than priming feelings of low power.

To conclude, although individuals who feel powerful are motivated to be close to the specific individuals over whom they have power, they prefer to be distant from people in general. Moreover, this tendency generalizes to actual behavior, leading them to sit further away from others, decreasing their tendency to conform to others’ preferences in a product choice situation, and affecting their tendency to give and accept gifts.

REFERENCES