



Fear and loving in social hierarchy: Sex differences in preferences for power versus status



Nicholas A. Hays

New York University, Stern School of Business, 40 West Fourth Street, Suite 701A, New York, NY 10012, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Paper examines relative desirability of power and status.
- Men desire power more than women do but women desire status more than men do.
- Legitimacy affects desirability of status but not power.

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ABSTRACT

Famous thinkers throughout history from Nepos to Machiavelli have had strong opinions about whether it is better to be feared or loved. A related debate continues today about whether it is preferable to have power or status, a distinction between resources and respect. Across three studies, I find that men desire power more than women do, whereas women desire status more than men do. Furthermore, the extent to which hierarchical differences are seen as fair and legitimate increases the desirability of status, but power legitimacy does not affect the desirability of power. This research indicates that people perceive and value power and status distinctly, and provides additional evidence that confounding the two theoretically or empirically may distort our understanding of psychological responses to social hierarchy.

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Introduction

“Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but...[it] is much safer to be feared than loved...”

[– Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527)]

“The power is detested, and miserable the life, of him who wishes to be feared rather than to be loved.”– Cornelius Nepos (c. 100 B.C.–c. 25 B.C.)

As Machiavelli and Nepos foreshadowed, leaders continue to debate whether it is preferable to be feared or loved (Archie, Altmann, & Alberts, 2012; Frank, 1985; Pfeffer, 1992). This debate is centered around a preference for power, defined as control over valued resources, versus status, the extent to which one is respected by others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Recent research has begun to uncover distinct effects of power and status on our behavior (Blader & Chen, 2012; Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012) and on others' perceptions of us (Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011). However, no empirical evidence exists on whether individuals have distinct preferences for power versus

status. Do people prefer power over status (as Machiavelli suggested), is status preferable to power (as advocated by Nepos), or are people indifferent?

These questions are important because hierarchy is ubiquitous in social life and the promise of upward mobility is a prevalent incentive (Lazear & Rosen, 1981; Leavitt, 2005), from the corner office at work to the list of platinum, gold, and silver benefactors prominently displayed at local museums. To the extent that a position in a hierarchy affords more power than status or vice versa, promotions and related incentives may vary in their motivational effectiveness. Furthermore, because empirical studies of power or status often confound the two, it is unclear whether documented effects are driven by power, status, or some combination of both.

The present research aims to fill this gap by examining relative preferences for power versus status. I posit that sex moderates preferences for power and status, with men seeing power as more desirable than women do, but women seeing status as more desirable than men do (Cross & Madson, 1997; Offermann & Schrier, 1985). This research contributes to the literature on social hierarchy by increasing our understanding of how power and status are perceived and valued. Moreover, the paper contributes methodologically by disentangling the desirability of power and status with conjoint analysis (Luce & Tukey, 1964), an established method for discretely valuing related constructs that is relatively underutilized in social psychology.

E-mail address: nhays@stern.nyu.edu.

Power versus status

Although a significant amount of early research on social hierarchy conflated power and status (e.g., French & Raven, 1959; Shils, 1970), recent work has shown that the distinction is important theoretically and empirically. Magee and Galinsky (2008) provided definitions of power and status that differ in their loci — power is based on resources under the control of a social actor whereas status exists in the eyes of others who confer respect on the social actor. Consequently, power creates a sense of independence (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, & Whitson, 2008; van Kleef et al., 2008) whereas status focuses people on relationships with others (Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006). The experience of independence versus interdependence differentially affects how people interact with others. For example, power decreases procedural justice toward others but status increases it (Blader & Chen, 2012), and having power without status leads people to denigrate others (Fast et al., 2012). Although power and status tend to be positively correlated, similar to height and weight, people acknowledge them as distinct. For example, people see professors as high in power and status and secretaries as low in power and status, and yet view Olympic athletes as high in status but low in power and bouncers as low in status but high in power (Fragale et al., 2011).

As described in the opening paragraph, the distinction between power and status is similar to the distinction between dominance and prestige (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Whereas dominance involves gaining acquiescence through force or threat of force, prestige is based on respect freely conferred from others who seek proximity to capable individuals. Dominance and prestige both lead to influence over others (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013; Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Livingston, 2012), much like power and status. Indeed, the definition of prestige is similar to the definition of status and, as Mao Zedong famously remarked, “power grows from the barrel of a gun,” which is consistent with a dominance-based definition of power. However, force or threat of force represents only one source of power. An individual who controls a department budget has power over others without needing to threaten force.

Valuing power and status

If power and status are distinct, is one preferable to the other? Research on social motivation suggests that power and status are both desirable, and compelling arguments can be made that either one is more desirable than the other. On the one hand, people desire control, which is at the heart of power. People who feel in control are more motivated, have greater confidence, set higher goals, and achieve more (Brehm & Self, 1989; Henry & Sniezek, 1993). The sense of control afforded by power inhibits the release of the stress hormone cortisol and decreases anxiety (Sherman et al., 2012). Conversely, restriction of control increases anxiety and the risk for a variety of mental illnesses (Leotti, Iyengar, & Ochsner, 2010; Link & Phelan, 1995). Together, this research suggests that the need for power is fundamental.

On the other hand, the quest for status has been described as universal (Barkow, 1975). People jockey for status, even at considerable expense to their own economic resources and performance (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Bendersky & Shah, 2012; Flynn et al., 2006). Status has positive effects on self-esteem, physical well-being, and mental health (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Leary, Terdal, Tambor, & Downs, 1995). Within groups, high status members feel a greater sense of social acceptance, which helps satisfy the need for belongingness (Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Status may be particularly desirable relative to power because status can be diffuse, carrying over into multiple contexts (Frank, 1985), whereas power exists only in domains where one's resources are valued (Fragale et al., 2011).

Underlying differences between men and women in Needs for Power and Affiliation (McClelland, 1987) provide one potential answer

to the question about relative preferences for power and status. Evidence suggests that men are higher in Need for Power than are women. Men construe themselves in more independent terms than women do (Cross & Madson, 1997), and power provides a route to independence (Galinsky et al., 2008; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Men also have more favorable attitudes toward power (Offermann & Schrier, 1985) and are more attentive to power-related cues (Mason, Zhang, & Dyer, 2010) than are women. Finally, only men leverage trivial associations with others to see themselves as powerful (Goldstein & Hays, 2011). Together, this suggests that men may desire power more than women do. Conversely, women are higher in Need for Affiliation (Hill, 1987) and tend to be more interdependent than are men, defining themselves based on their relationships and group memberships (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Cross & Madson, 1997). Women may therefore desire status more than men do because commanding others' respect signals acceptance and security of group memberships that can satisfy affiliation needs (Anderson et al., 2012; Hollander, 1958). Thus, I predict that men will desire power more than women do whereas women will desire status more than men do.

In addition to potential sex differences in preferences for power and status, I posit that hierarchy legitimacy, the extent to which the hierarchy is seen as “appropriate, proper, and just” (Tyler, 2006), may affect the desirability of power and status because legitimate hierarchies are less likely to be challenged and therefore more stable. Status should be more dependent on legitimacy than power, however, because status is consensually conferred by others and only exists to the extent that others are willing to confer it (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Although legitimate power is also desirable (Tyler & Blader, 2005), legitimacy is less critical because power can be possessed and exercised without the consent of subordinates (Fragale et al., 2011).

Why would someone voluntarily confer high status upon someone he or she sees as less deserving than others? This can occur because status is the collective product of interactions among an entire network of group members rather than the product of dyadic interactions (Ridgeway & Diekema, 1989). Status hierarchies form almost instantaneously at the beginning of a group's life (Bales, 1958) based on demographic traits and behaviors thought to signal relative competence (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). Over time and with repeated interaction, however, group members have additional opportunities to assess each other's competence more thoroughly (Bunderson, 2003). An individual who begins to doubt the competence of a high-status group member may continue to defer to that person because others are doing so, and their deference is assumed to indicate that they still feel the high-status individual deserves his or her status, an example of pluralistic ignorance (Miller & McFarland, 1987). This is similar to the well-known Abilene Paradox (Harvey, 1974).

The more one's status is perceived as illegitimate, however, the more likely it is to be challenged (Tyler, 2006). A challenge could shatter illusions of consensus about a high-status group member's competence, which could cause an aversive status loss (Pettit, Yong, & Spataro, 2010). Illegitimate power can also be challenged, but challenges are less likely to occur or be successful because power-holders control valuable resources (Magee & Galinsky, 2008) and can retaliate by withholding those resources. Thus, illegitimate status is more precarious than illegitimate power because illegitimate status is secured only by pluralistic ignorance whereas illegitimate power is secured by resources under control of the power-holder. Therefore, hierarchy legitimacy should have a greater effect on the desirability of status than power.

Research overview

I examine relative preferences for power and status in three studies, investigating sex differences in these preferences in all three studies and returning to the effects of hierarchy legitimacy in the third study. In the first study, participants completed a job design task where they indicated the importance of power and status at work. In the second

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