Original Article:

THE EFFECTS OF POWER ON
THE PROCESSING OF IDENTITY THREAT

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Abstract

Identity theory provides a framework for how we process information from other people depending on what social positions we occupy. The current study explored how power impacts the processing of an identity threat with college student participants (N=217). High power was predicted to decrease acceptance of identity-threatening information, and low power was predicted to increase acceptance of identity-threatening information. However, power yielded non-significant effects in our sample. When using a subsample of students who felt insecure about their career prospects, results showed that power increased the likelihood of accepting identity threatening information.

Keywords: identity, power, identity threat, college, priming

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INTRODUCTION

Can social factors impact how likely individuals are to accept evidence? Research has shown that exogenous variables, such as thinking about positive values, can impact how people respond to identity-threatening information (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). However, little is known about how power impacts the processing of identity threats. Power has been shown to reduce our attention to other perspectives (Galinsky et al., 2006). Identity theory involves considering other perspectives to formulate our own identity (Felson, 1985). Because both power and identity theory involve consider the perspectives of others, we have reason to believe that power should affect identity threats. Thus, the current study seeks to find out if feeling powerful, and subsequently paying less attention to other perspectives, would make individuals less concerned with identity-threatening information.

Power

Experimental work has shown that priming power creates less concern for social consequences (Galinsky et al., 2003), resulting in less of a need to pay attention to other people's perspectives (Galinsky et al., 2006), including expert opinions (Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012). Priming power also motivates people to focus on information that is consistent with their existing knowledge (Fischer et al 2011), resist persuading messages (Brinol et al., 2007), and rely more on mental shortcuts through automatic social cognition (Keltner Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Conversely, people who have low power have greater concern for social consequences, engage in more controlled analytic thinking, and want to consider other people's perspectives (Galinsky et al., 2003). The power prime developed by Galinksy and colleagues (2003) has been found to produce reliable and robust effects and has been used extensively in social psychology experiments since its inception.

Broadly, individuals with power tend to be less likely to be concerned with the perspectives of others and their social consequences are not perceived as threatening. Because power impacts how we attend to the perspectives of others, it would be useful to connect this evidence with other theories that involve attending to other individuals. Identity theory is one such research area that involves attending to the perspectives of others through reflected appraisals.

Identity Theory

The role identity originated from the work of McCall and Simmons (1978, p. 65) and is defined as one's "imaginative view of himself as he likes to think of himself being and acting as an occupant" of a certain role. The "role" in role identities derives from the "cultural expectations tied to social positions in the social structure that actors try to meet" (Burke & Stets 2009, p. 39). These roles involve a cluster of values, duties, rights, and obligations associated with a particular identity and are enacted through our behavior

(Burke & Stets, 2009). How strongly identities help us navigate and behave in our environment depends on their prominence.

A prominent identity is simply one that is subjectively important to a person (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014). Greater commitment, which deals with how our social connections influence the devotion we have for a particular identity, increases identity prominence (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The more prominent the identity, the greater the likelihood it will impact our behavior. This occurs because we aim to behave in ways that act consistently with the roles of our identity.

How other individuals impact the strength of commitment occurs through the process of reflected appraisals. Reflected appraisals are the feedback we get from significant others that influence our identities (Felson, 1985). Individuals prefer consistency between the meaning of their identity and input from reflected appraisals (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). If our close associates inform us that we are behaving in a way inconsistent with our identity, we will attempt to reduce any mismatch between the two.

As noted above, greater power makes individuals attend less to the perspectives of others. Thus, if reflected appraisals involve attending to the perspectives of others to construct the meaning of our identity, then higher levels of power may disrupt this process. The intersection of power and reflected appraisals leads us to our first proposition:

p = actor

P1) The more p feels powerful, then the more p rejects reflected appraisals.

These identities help us navigate the social world, but sometimes we are exposed to information that is incongruent with the values of our identity, which can alter our behavior. Social scientists define these scenarios as identity threats.

Identity Threats

The Identity Control Model illustrates the cybernetic process of identity threats, within the Identity Theory framework (Burke, 1991; Stets & Burke, 2009). The model begins with the input, which consists of the information to which individuals are exposed from their environment. This input is biased by our perceptions, which are included as the perceived self-meanings in the model. Then these perceived self-meanings are influenced by reflected appraisals (Felson, 1985). After that, we compare the perceptual inputs to our *identity standard*, or the set of meanings associated with the roles of an identity, with the *comparator*. The comparator assesses the similarity of the meanings between the perceptual inputs and the identity standard one has in their memory. Error occurs from a mismatch between the perceptual inputs and our identity standard, creating the *identity threat*. Finally, our *output* is the behavior that occurs to correct any mismatch between the

inputs and our identity standard. The less error, the less need for role performances (behavior) to be consistent with the identity standard.

This cybernetic model provides us with a foundation and inspiration for our next two theoretical propositions:

P2) The more p rejects reflected appraisals that do not support the identity, then the less mismatch between p's perceptual input and identity standard.

P3) The less mismatch between p's perceptual input and identity standard, then the less p engages in error correcting behaviors.

Identity threats are unpleasant, and individuals often try to reduce the threat as much as they can. Sometimes this means rejecting evidence. For example, when the conservative identity of an individual is made salient, they are even more likely to reject the existence of climate change (Unsworth & Fielding, 2014). Psychologists have found that having a participant think of positive values (i.e. thinking of how they are a good spouse) can make them more likely to accept identity-threatening information (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). This suggests exogenous social variables could impact the Identity Control Model, but to date, such psychological mechanisms have not been explicitly combined with the Identity Control Model to our knowledge. We propose that power influences the Identity Control Model as mentioned in the earlier propositions and that this ultimately impacts how a person responds to identity threatening information. Because power makes people less attentive to the perspectives of others, they may not experience mismatch between the input and identity standard. Less mismatch would create less need for engaging in error correcting behaviors. If an individual is not engaging in as many error correcting behaviors, then they will be more likely to reject identity threatening information.

P4) The less p engages in error correcting behaviors, then the more p will reject identity-threatening information.

Current Study

Given that individuals who feel powerful are less concerned with the perspectives of others, this would make them more likely to down weight reflected appraisals. It is difficult to empirically differentiate between outright rejecting or down weighting reflected appraisals. So, when this paper comments on the rejecting of reflected appraisals, it is understood that it may not be a complete rejection. If individuals are not as concerned with reflected appraisals, there would be less mismatch between their perceptual input and identity standard. This mismatch between the perceptual input and identity standard is theoretical and tested by the subsequent outcome variables. Less mismatch between

perceptual input and the identity standard would create less error and less error-correcting behaviors. Reduced error-correcting behaviors may make individuals more likely to reject new identity threatening information. Therefore, power can be then studied as an exogenous variable in the Identity Control Model as summarized by the following propositions:

1) The more p feels powerful, then the more p rejects reflected appraisals.
2) The more p rejects reflected appraisals that do not support the identity, then the less mismatch between p's perceptual input and identity standard.
3) The less mismatch between p's perceptual input and identity standard, then the less p engages in error correcting behaviors.
4) The less p engages in error correcting behaviors, then the more p will reject identity-threatening information.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Given The researchers recruited 217 undergraduate students (166 women, 175 white) at the University of South Carolina to complete an experiment using Qualtrics software. Before beginning the experiment, the participants had to sign an informed consent form. Participants completed the study in exchange for course credit. In this experiment, participants were randomly assigned to a high (n=100) or low (n=117) power condition.

The current study aims to evaluate how feeling powerful and powerless impacts the processing of identity threatening information. The key independent variables of interest are feeling powerful or powerless, creating two experimental groups. The dependent variable is the acceptance of evidence that threatens a prominent identity. The identity the current study assessed was a college student identity. College student identity prominence was measured on a 1-7 Likert scale through questions assessing the importance of the identity that were adopted from Brenner, Serpe, and Stryker (2014). Questions about the participant's race, gender, college major, and confidence that one's major typically finds good employment after college were also asked at the end of the study (see Appendix A).

The empirical indicator for high power was a priming task that made participants feel like they have power over others. The empirical indicator for low power was a priming task that made participants feel like other people have power over them (see Appendix B). These tasks were adopted from Galinsky and colleagues (2003) and have been shown to make people feel powerful or powerless by recalling a time they felt powerful or powerless. The participants had 10 minutes to think about the event and describe how they felt and had to write at least 250 characters.

Immediately after each subject finished writing, they were exposed to the identity threat. Because all the participants were University of South Carolina students, the researchers threatened the prominent college student identity with false information that suggested college is no longer relevant or valuable. Participants read a summary of some fake studies that argue college degrees are becoming irrelevant and people obtain a sufficient knowledge base from online material and open courses. The participants were then asked a few questions on how much they accept the information on a 1-7 scale (see Appendix C). Factor analysis and Cronbach's Alpha (data available upon request) were used to determine that the questions asking about future earnings and job prospects loaded strongly onto one factor and were combined into an index for accepting the evidence. Confirmatory t-tests were then used to compare the two power groups and the index of two questions about accepting the evidence the participants just read. Participants were also asked about the trustworthiness of the information as a check to make sure they took the evidence seriously.

The laboratory experiment tested the following operational hypothesis:

H1) Priming participants to feel like they have power over others will make them less likely to accept identity threatening information.

RESULTS

Participants in both groups had strong college student identity prominence (see Table 1). A t-test revealed that there was no significant difference between the identity prominence index and the two power groups ($t(215) = -.095$, p >.05).

Table 1. **Descriptive statistics for student identity prominence and power**

Question	Low Power Mean, SD, Std. Error	High Power Mean, SD, Std. Error
Being a college student is an important part of my self-image.	6.21 0.943 0.087	6.09 1.138 0.114
Being a college student is an important reflection of who I am.	5.92 1.131 0.105	5.91 1.207 0.121
I've come to see myself as a college student.	6.27 0.997 0.092	6.44 0.857 0.086
I have a strong sense of belonging to the college student community.	5.70 1.069 0.099	5.66 1.204 0.120

A t-test showed that power did not have a significant main effect on the index of questions measuring how much the participants accepted the evidence they just read (t(215) = -.527, p >.05 (see Table 2)). Thus, power was not found to have any influence on acceptance of evidence. On the same 1-7 scale, participants were also asked how trustworthy the information they just read was. Overall, they thought the information was fairly trustworthy (M=5.41, SD=1.186). There was also no significant difference between belief in trustworthiness and power groups (t(215) = .436, p >.05). Thus, our data did not support our hypothesis and last theoretical proposition.

Table 2. **Descriptive statistics for power's effect on acceptance of evidence**

Question	Low Power Mean, SD, Std. Error	High Power Mean, SD, Std. Error
I think my college degree will increase my lifetime earnings	6.35 0.969 0.089	6.42 0.855 0.085
I think my college degree will help me get a good job	6.29 0.865 0.080	6.34 0.987 0.099
College degrees are no longer valuable	2.42 1.275 0.118	2.34 1.343 0.134
The evidence I just read about college degrees is convincing	5.66 1.347 0.124	5.61 1.406 0.141
The evidence I just read about college degrees is trustworthy	5.62 1.116 0.104	5.55 1.266 0.127

Descriptive statistics are shown for all questions, but only the first two were included in our index.

However, this null effect may be explained by college major. One of the demographic questions asked if participants felt their major had a difficult time finding employment after college. Thus, we were curious if those who agreed that their major typically found good employment (n=117) would accept the evidence more than those who did not agree their major typically found good employment after college (n=59). Those who neither agreed nor disagreed about their major finding good employment (n = 41) were not included in this analysis. We found that the participants who were secure about their job prospects were more likely to reject the evidence compared to those who were insecure about their job prospects (t(174) = -2.51, p <.05 (see Table 3).

Because security in one's major to produce job opportunities seemed to influence the results of the study, an ancillary analysis examined individuals who did not agree their major would get them a good job and power. Interestingly, power had a significant effect on the acceptance of evidence index (t(58) = 2.37, p <.05); however, it was in the opposite

direction that was predicted. Participants concerned about their major's job prospects were actually more likely to accept the evidence when in the high-power position.

Table 3. **Descriptive statistics for college major's effect on acceptance of evidence.**

Question	My college major will get me a good job		My college major will not get me a good job	
	Mean, SD, Std. Error		Mean, SD, Std. Error	
I think my college degree will increase my lifetime earnings	6.53*	0.836 0.077	6.27	1.014 0.132
I think my college degree will help me get a good job	6.48*	0.783 0.072	6.09	1.144 0.150
College degrees are no longer valuable	2.26	1.269 0.117	2.68	1.456 0.189
The evidence I just read about college degrees is convincing	5.50	1.472 0.136	5.73	1.257 0.164
The evidence I just read about college degrees is trustworthy	5.35	1.227 0.113	5.52	1.158 0.152

* = significant at .05 level. Descriptive statistics are shown for all questions, but only the first two were included in our index.

DISCUSSION

Identities can help us navigate our social worlds, but they can also bias our information processing with more routinized responses. Self-affirmation has been found to make people more open to accepting identity-threatening information; however, little is known about the impact of power in processing of identity threats. This study assessed how power influenced the processing of a student identity threat. Our study first had college students read a power prime to make them feel powerful or powerless. The participants then read an identity threatening passage that suggested college was no longer valuable. The researchers predicted that participants in the high-power condition would be more likely to reject the information. However, we did not find any significant effects for power. We can examine each proposition and assess what may have created our null results.

P1) The more *p* feels powerful, then the more *p* rejects reflected appraisals.

Our first proposition first requires that the participant feels powerful, but we could not know if this was the case because no manipulation check was used. The task used to generate feelings of power has been well-studied, but it still would have been beneficial to include a manipulation check measuring the participant's sense of power (Anderson, John, and Keltner 2012). It is possible that the prime did not work on a significant number of participants, which would certainly impact the results. Future researchers should include a manipulation check to know if their participants actually felt powerful during the study.

P2) The more p rejects reflected appraisals that do not support the identity, then the less mismatch between p's perceptual input and identity standard.

Our second proposition requires that powerful participants would reject reflected appraisals, but our study might not have produced these appraisals adequately. It is possible that reading information about college outcomes from the work of education scholars is too indirectly related to how others view us to connect to reflected appraisals. Power may still reduce attention to reflected appraisals, but the current study may not have had any direct association to the individual. A future study could present identity threatening information from close friends or colleagues. Additionally, future research could aim to directly test this mismatch more empirically rather than leaving it as theoretical.

P3) The less mismatch between p's perceptual input and identity standard, then the less p engages in error correcting behaviors.

A potential problem with the third proposition could have been the diversity of college majors in our sample. Participants who believed their major would lead them to a good job were more likely to agree that college will increase their earnings, make them get a good job, and agree that colleges are valuable, regardless of condition. This suggests they were not affected by the identity threat since they already believed they were in a lucrative major. Thus, while the two samples did not differ in college student identity prominence, the students may have had different meanings ascribed to their role identities producing different identity standards. Just as men and women have different identity meanings for being a parent (Simon, 1995), other identities can be influenced by other factors to create significant variation among individuals. Furthermore, the present study may not have tapped into college student identity at all. Research by Reitzes and Burke (1980) found that a significant meaning of the college student identity involves academic responsibility, so perhaps the value of college more generally falls too far outside the college student identity. A future study could try to threaten academic responsibility instead of the value of college as an intuition.

P4) The less *p* engages in error correcting behaviors, then the more *p* will reject identity-threatening information.

Our last proposition may have been impacted by power influencing identity-threatening information differently than theorized. When only looking at participants who felt insecure about their majors, we found that high power made them disagree that college will help them get a good job. This subgroup of participants also disagreed that college will increase lifetime earnings and agreed college was no longer valuable (though these findings only approached significance). Power has been found to increase self-esteem (Fast et al., 2009). Self-esteem is highly related to self-affirmation, which has been shown to protect individuals from identity threats (Sherman, 2006). Perhaps power then protects people from identity threats as well because elevated self-esteem acts as a mediating variable. If this is true, such an effect may override any potential impact of power's influence with reflected appraisals. However, the sample size of insecure college major participants was 29 and 30 for low and high power respectively. Thus, sample size would ideally need to be larger to have statistical reliability and a stronger argument for determining causality.

Not only did our study lack college major diversity, it lacked diversity in race and gender. Our sample had an over-representation of female participants (76%) and white participants (81%), which limited any statistical analysis for looking at race or gender effects as well. It would have been interesting to see if race or gender interacted with power in my study. This would have only been an exploratory analysis as we did not theorize if race or gender would impact the results. Future researchers could investigate these potential factors if they recruit a more diverse participant sample.

This study added the exogenous social variable of power into the Identity Control Model. Even though power did not yield significant effects, interesting results emerged when the researchers only looked at participants who felt insecure about their college major, albeit in the opposite direction than predicted. Future research can build from these findings and perhaps use competing hypotheses with how power may increase or decrease acceptance of identity threats. Beyond a scholarly contribution, this research offers an important perspective for understanding how college students feel about the insecurity of their career prospects. Additionally, this paper offers insight in how power could influence how people process information that conflicts with an important identity.

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APPENDIX A:
IDENTITY PROMINENCE, DEMOGRAPHIC, AND COLLEGE MAJOR QUESTIONS

Identity Prominence Questions
Being a college student is an important part of my self-image.
Being a college student is an important reflection of who I am.
I have come to think of myself as a "college student."
I have a strong sense of belonging to the college student community.

Demographic Questions
What is your sex?
(Female, Male)
What is your race?
(white, black, Hispanic, Asian, other)

College Major Questions
What is your major?
Do you have a major in Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM)?
People with my major have a difficult time finding a job after college (1-7 Likert scale)
What is the highest education level of your mother and father?
Are you a first generation college student?

APPENDIX B:
HIGH AND LOW POWER PRIME TEXT

<u>High Power prime</u>:

Please recall a particular incident in which you had power over another individual or individuals. By power, we mean a situation in which you controlled the ability of another person or persons to get something they wanted, or were in a position to evaluate those individuals. Using the space provided below, please describe this situation in which you had power what happened, how you felt, etc.

<u>Low Power Prime</u>:

Please recall a particular incident in which someone had power over you. By power, we mean a situation in which they controlled your ability to get something you wanted, or were in a position to evaluate you. Using the space provided below, please describe this situation in which they had power over what happened, how you felt, etc.

APPENDIX C:
STUDENT IDENTITY THREAT TEXT
AND ACCEPTANCE OF EVIDENCE QUESTIONS

<u>College student identity threat:</u>

College has been a valuable experience both economically and intellectually for many students over the years. However, modern technology is beginning to change the educational climate. With so much information being available for free on the internet, motivated students can learn as much as they can from a college course without ever sitting in a classroom. There are also many free online courses that are taught by top professors in many fields. A recent study by Johnson and colleagues (2015) found that high school graduates who took a free online course in biology actually performed higher on a general biology test than USC students who took an intro to biology course. Another recent study by Cohen and colleagues (2016) found that participants performed better on the math section of the GRE when they took a free online math course compared to USC math majors.

With college tuition prices sky-rocketing, some leading economists have predicted that the traditional college experience may become obsolete. Stanford economist Dr. Lee argues: "With the current market as it is, a college degree simply isn't as valuable as it once was. If people obtain the skills they need from free online sources, they can be just as successful in the workforce as those with college degrees without the crippling debt." Given the success of non-college degree students, the wealth of free information found online, and the economic climate, college degrees may soon be a thing of the past.

Acceptance of Evidence Questions
I think my college degree will increase my lifetime earnings
I think my college degree will help me get a better job
College degrees are no longer valuable
The evidence I just read about college degrees is convincing
The evidence I just read about college degrees is trustworthy

APPENDIX D:
DEFINITIONS FOR RELEVANT TERMS

Relevant Definitions

Power – having the ability to control another's resources

Social position – any socially recognized category of actors (Wikitheoria, 2014)

Role – a cluster of values, duties, rights, and obligations associated with a particular identity and are enacted through our behavior (Wikitheoria, 2014)

Role identity – view of oneself of being and acting as an occupant of a certain role

Identity Salience – probability an identity being enacted in a given situation

Commitment – the influence social connections have on the devotion individuals have for a particular identity

Identity threat – one's experience of being exposed to information that is incongruent with the values of their identity

Input – the information to which individuals are exposed from their environment

Perceptions - perceived self-meanings

Reflected appraisals – process that influences how we see ourselves from the input of our associates

Comparator - assesses the similarity of the meanings between the perceptual inputs and the identity standard one has in their memory

Identity standard – set of meanings associated with the roles of an identity with the comparator

Error – a mismatch between the perceptual inputs and our identity standard

Output – behavior that occurs to correct any mismatch between the inputs and our identity standard

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