

The Presumptuous Power Holder

September 05, 2013



Louis XIV, the vain French king who held the longest reign in European history, epitomized absolute monarchy. But his blind pursuit of power—highlighted by the four wars he waged—left the French people demoralized and the treasury bankrupt. The self-proclaimed Sun King fully expected others to sacrifice and suffer to satisfy his own ambitions.

Psychological scientists Jennifer Overbeck and Vitaliya Drouman point to Louis XIV as an extreme example of power holders who pursue their goals without considering or understanding the desires of the people they represent.

Overbeck, associate professor of management at the University of Utah, and Drouman of the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, focused on such behavior in a series of studies on self-anchoring—using one’s own traits and attitudes as a reference point when judging the mindsets of others. They report their findings in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#). They hypothesized that people in positions of power—CEOs or government leaders, for example—are more prone to self-anchoring than are people in subordinate positions. Think of bosses who announce decisions they’ve made for “the good of the team,” without ever actually seeking the team’s input. These superiors appear to simply convince themselves that their subordinates want the same things they do.

To test their theory, Overbeck and Drouman began by recruiting 50 university students and randomly assigned them into high-power or low-power roles. They asked the participants to think of a group in which they were a leader or member. The subjects then completed a questionnaire rating the degree to which 90 traits, such as *intelligent*, *timid*, and *lazy*, best described themselves and their group. Lastly, participants were asked to rate the degree to which the same traits applied solely to their in-group.

Compared to subjects in the low-power role, high-power participants responded faster, overall, when rating whether traits were descriptive of their in-group. Interestingly, this self-anchoring occurred primarily for negative traits.

In another study, the researchers recruited 90 participants and randomly assigned them to high-power, low-power and neutral conditions. Participants assigned to the high-power condition wrote briefly about an incident in which they had power over someone else, while those in the low-power condition wrote about a time when someone had power over them. Those in the neutral condition described their last trip to the grocery store.

Next, the researchers employed a mood scale to assess each participant's current emotional state.

The participants then viewed 36 photos of faces expressing emotions, but the pictures were cropped to show only the eyes. Each image was accompanied by a list of four possible emotions—*friendly*, *interested*, *thoughtful*, *panicked*, *worried*—and the participants were asked to pick the one that best fit. They found that the high-power individuals who felt more negative during the study were more prone to mistakenly seeing negative emotions in the pictures they viewed than were the low-power participants.

In concluding their article, Overbeck and Droutman say more research is needed to eliminate the possibility that their findings instead indicate that low power suppresses self-anchoring. They add that other conditional variables—such as group size—should be examined.

But they point out that their study results support previous research showing that power leads to poorer perspective-taking and that power holders tend to objectify others.