

## **Why do superiors attend to negative stereotypic information about their subordinates? Effects of power legitimacy on social perception**

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### *Abstract*

*Power can be defined as control over other people's outcomes. Using this definition, we explored the impact of power on attentional processes involved in impression formation. Because powerful individuals may want to maintain and justify their position, powerful participants should pay particular attention to negative stereotype-consistent information about their subordinates. In contrast, powerless participants should devote their attention to stereotype-inconsistent information in an attempt to increase their control over the social context. Study 1 directly manipulated control by assigning participants to the role of leader or subordinate in a task group. Results showed that, compared to subordinates, leaders devoted more attention to negative stereotypic attributes. Study 2 manipulated the legitimacy of power and replicated the pattern found in Study 1 but only when power was illegitimate. Our findings suggest that the experience of power can be associated with feelings of threat, especially when power is illegitimate, thereby orienting impression-formation processes toward information likely to maintain the existing social structure. We discuss our results in the context of current work on motivated social cognition, social identity, and legitimisation. Copyright © 2000 John Wiley Sons, Ltd.*

One of the most important aspects that characterise social relations is power, or, to be more precise, differences in power between social agents. Power can be defined as the control one has over other people's outcomes (Dépret & Fiske, 1993). Conversely, powerlessness may be conceptualised as the lack of control over one's own outcomes. Therefore, differences in power may be seen as

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differences in outcome control. Whereas those who do not have control over their outcomes can be considered as powerless, those who enjoy such control can be considered as being powerful. Personality, social, clinical, and developmental psychologists view the need for control as a basic and universal feature in human beings (Brehm, 1993; Fiske & Emery, 1993; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979).

One of the current models of impression formation—the Continuum Model—proposed by Fiske & Neuberg (1990) suggests that people's motivation for control plays a major role in explaining the impact that power has on person perception in social relationships. Indeed, the model states that people may engage in a number of different impression formation strategies that can lead them anywhere between making an individuated impression and resorting to a category-based (or stereotyped) judgements. One of the most relevant factors that impact on perceivers' position along the continuum are the perceiver motivations, especially those related to the interdependence structure of the perceiver and the target (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990).

According to Fiske (1993), powerful perceivers do not really need to seek complex information about others. As a consequence, powerholders are more likely than powerless perceivers to ignore information that fails to confirm their *a priori* views (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, and Yzerbyt (in press) called this attentional strategy *stereotype by default*. The net result of this state of affairs is that powerholders will likely bias their perceptions toward the category-end of the impression formation continuum.

More recently, Fiske and her colleagues (Fiske, 1998; Goodwin & Fiske, 1996; Goodwin, Fiske & Yzerbyt, 1995, poster presented at the 103rd annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York City) argued that, to the extent that powerholders feel that they need to justify their judgement to others, they may also be tempted to *stereotype by design*. Stereotyping by design implies that powerful perceivers pay effortful attention to stereotypic information in order to be able to ground their judgement on a firm basis (see also, Kunda, 1990; Leyens, Yzerbyt & Schadron, 1992, 1994). The consequence is that powerholders are likely to invest a sizeable amount of cognitive resources in order to explore the information that confirms their expectations (Goodwin *et al.*, in press). According to social judgeability theorists (Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens & Rocher, 1994), feeling entitled to judge may further increase powerholders' confidence in their prior beliefs, including their stereotypes. Indeed, recent research suggests that, as people gain power, their evaluations of others become increasingly stereotypic (Goodwin *et al.*, in press) and negative (Georgesens & Harris, in press). In sum, to the extent that powerholders may want to justify their judgement and keep their social status, they will pay special attention to stereotypic traits that entail negative implications for the target.

Interestingly, a similar message regarding the impact of power on social perception emerges from other strands of research. For instance, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) stresses the fact that powerholders may want to keep their power positions intact and to boost their positive identity by relying on stereotypic views of others. Specifically, members of high status or otherwise advantaged groups may pay special attention to the negative stereotypic traits of the members of the low-status or disadvantaged group in an attempt to justify their favourable and often illegitimate

dominant position (Tajfel, 1981). This conclusion is highly reminiscent of earlier work within the functional view of stereotypes and intergroup relations (Avigdor, 1953; Sherif & Sherif, 1969; Huici, 1984). More recently, Fein and Spencer (1997) have shown that stereotyping and prejudice may be a common means to maintain ones' self-image. Finally, the work on the just world belief (Lerner, 1980) is yet another line of investigation that stresses the impact of differential power on impression formation. The general idea here is that, if the world is fair, then people get what they deserve and *deserve what they get*. Over the years, an impressive body of research has accumulated to show that people who endure painful events or find themselves in unpleasant situations are generally seen as deserving their lot. In the same vein, people who believe in a just world have been found to infer from poor outcomes that someone possesses a bad character (for a review, see Furnham & Procter, 1989). In their own way, these various traditions of research concur with the idea that people who are in charge are likely to perceive subordinates in a rather negative light.

In contrast to powerful perceivers, powerless perceivers depend on other people for their outcomes. In order to improve their chances of reaching some desired outcomes, powerless perceivers need to be able to predict other peoples' behaviour (Erber & Fiske, 1984). Indeed, if one can reach a coherent understanding of another person's behaviour, one can anticipate future reactions and make plans accordingly (Fiske & Dépret, 1996). In other words, the less control one has, the more important it becomes to predict the behaviour of those who are in control. To the extent that this reasoning holds, it is hardly surprising that the powerless are motivated to form detailed impressions of others. This is especially true for those targets who are relatively powerful.

One way to bring perceivers to form an individuated impression of others is by creating task-oriented outcome dependency. Indeed, when people's outcomes are mutually contingent on another person's performance, stereotype-consistent information is likely to be less useful. This is because stereotype-consistent information is totally redundant with prior knowledge. In contrast, stereotype-inconsistent information clearly enhances the quality of prediction and enhances the feeling of control. It is thus to be expected that people who are outcome dependent are going to pay less attention to consistent than to inconsistent attributes. A series of studies by Neuberg and Fiske (1987) confirmed that, contrary to outcome independent participants, participants who were made outcome dependent paid increased attention to stereotype-inconsistent information (Erber & Fiske, 1984; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987; Ruscher, Fiske, Mike & Van Manen, 1991). Along the same lines, recent research by Stevens and Fiske (1996, unpublished manuscript) showed that people who are made evaluatively dependent (i.e. their self-esteem can be threatened by negative evaluations of powerholders) pay less attention to negative information and form positive impressions of their superiors.

Whereas most of the available research efforts have been devoted to a close examination of the information strategies adopted by powerless perceivers, Goodwin *et al.* (in press) recently examined the perspective of powerholders. In an illustrative study (Goodwin *et al.*, in press, Experiment 3), participants were led to believe that they would be occupying a superior, subordinate or observer position with regard to two of their supposed groupmates (a male and a female). Participants were allowed to

examine series of sentences allegedly endorsed by these groupmates. Valence and gender consistency of the sentences were crossed within each target. The main dependent variables were the attention devoted to the presentation sentences and the evaluative ratings of a final set of impression sentences. The results confirm that powerful participants focused their attention resources toward stereotyping the powerless targets and that powerless participants devoted their attention to individuate the powerful. Moreover, Goodwin *et al.* (in press) observed that powerless participants paid more attention to positive information about the powerful groupmates, confirming earlier findings (Stevens & Fiske, 1996).

Using a somewhat different approach, Georgesen and Harris (in press) had participants take part in actual perceiver–target dyadic interactions. Whereas half of the perceivers were informed that they would be the bosses in the interaction, others were given no power information. In an orthogonal manipulation, half of the targets learned that their partner would be the boss during the interaction. The other half received no power information. Perceivers' expectancies were also manipulated. Whereas half of the perceivers were told that their partner was creative, the other half learned that their partner was uncreative. The most interesting result presented by the authors is that power aware perceivers relied on self-enhancement and derogation of the target.

Although the conclusions coming out of these two series of studies dovetail nicely with the general hypothesis that powerholders tend to stereotype by design, the observed pattern of data clearly awaits replication. Contrary to Georgesen and Harris (in press), Goodwin *et al.* (in press) did not find that powerful perceivers value negative information more than positive information. Moreover, the various factors contributing to the emergence of the phenomenon remain largely unknown. Is it the case that all powerful people rely on stereotyping by design or are some conditions more likely to give rise to such strategic information processing. With these concerns in mind, we carried out two experiments to study the nature of the impression formation in short-term power situations.

The first study included powerful, powerless, and control participants in the context of a price-distribution situation. Participants in the three conditions were told to examine the traits describing their supposed groupmates in order to form an impression of them. Powerful and powerless groups were compared to power-irrelevant (control) evaluators. This allowed us to test not only whether powerless perceivers paid more attention to stereotypic-inconsistent information than control participants did but also whether the use of stereotype-based attentional strategies increased among powerholders. The second study aimed at further examining the findings of Study 1 by manipulating power legitimacy. Specifically, we wanted to assess whether the legitimacy of the power position had an effect on the kind of attentional strategies used by powerholders when they process information about their subordinates.

## STUDY 1

The main goal of Study 1 was to replicate Goodwin *et al.*'s (in press) findings. These authors showed that not only powerless but also powerful perceivers were motivated

to process the information they receive about the subordinates. Indeed, compared to power-irrelevant perceivers reading information about simple observers, both powerless and powerful perceivers spent more time to read information about their respective targets. Moreover, the powerful paid more attention to stereotype-consistent information about their subordinates than power irrelevant people about their group mates did. In other words, the data show strong evidence of the presence of stereotype by design among powerful perceivers. The powerful perceivers further complemented their stereotype-maintenance strategies by ignoring stereotype-inconsistent information. That is, power also leads perceivers to resort to stereotyping by default. In contrast, and again compared to the power irrelevant participants, powerless perceivers paid significantly more attention to stereotype-inconsistent information when they processed information pertaining to their powerful superiors.

In the present study, participants were asked to read information concerning hypothetical groupmates. The information could be stereotype-consistent, stereotype-inconsistent, or irrelevant, on the one hand, and negative or positive on the other hand. We manipulated the power given to the individual (powerful, powerless, and control participants). We operationalized stereotyping in terms of the attention devoted to the stereotype-consistent traits. In contrast, individuating was operationalized as the amount of attention directed to the stereotype-inconsistent information. According to our predictions, powerful and powerless perceivers will spend more time than control participants in examining information about their groupmates (hypothesis 1). We also predict that the specific kind of interdependence should moderate the kind of strategy used in processing the information. Thus, powerful perceivers should pay more attention to stereotype-consistent than the participants in the control condition (hypothesis 2), and in line with the stereotype by default idea, powerholders are expected to pay less attention to stereotype-inconsistent information than the control participants (hypothesis 3). In contrast, we expect that compared to control participants, powerless perceivers will devote special attention to stereotype-inconsistent features of the target individual (hypothesis 4). Regarding participants in the control group we do not expect differences in reading times between stereotype-consistent and stereotype inconsistent traits. Although some researches have shown that people notice instances that confirm expectancies (Rothbart, Evans & Fulero, 1979), other studies reveal that information that is inconsistent with expectancies also gets noticed (Hastie & Kumar, 1979).

The present study also aimed at checking for the possibility that powerholders may be particularly inclined to pay attention to the negative information, as suggested by the judgmental findings reported by Georgesen and Harris (in press). We thus examined the potential impact of the valence of the traits with a series of competing predictions in mind. On the one hand, (hypothesis 5a) all participants may preferentially attend to negative information because such evidence is typically perceived as being more informative (Fiske, 1980; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987, 1989; Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1991). On the other hand, following previous research we can predict (hypothesis 5b) that powerless perceivers may be particularly sensitive to positive information about the powerful because they are evaluatively dependent (Stevens & Fiske, 1996). Powerless perceivers adopt the latter strategy in order to form positive evaluations of their superiors and obtain certain levels of self-protection from potentially uncontrollable negative interactions and outcomes. To the extent that the

power manipulation used in this study could induce powerless perceivers to feel evaluatively-dependent on powerholders, the absence of power should increase the likelihood of a positive impression. This tendency to evaluate powerful individuals positively can be also seen as a result of the internalisation of the status quo as suggested by system-justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994). In contrast, powerful may be especially prone to concentrate on negative information. Negative information not only is generally seen as more diagnostic but also allows powerholders to ascertain their superiority and to legitimise the existing hierarchy. Because the available data from previous studies are not conclusive on this issue, we wanted to examine the effects of valence in a more detailed way.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 96 Spanish undergraduate students from the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Granada, Spain. They participated in the experiment for partial fulfilment of their course credit. Twenty-three participants were males and the remaining 73 participants were females, distributed in equal proportions among the experimental conditions. Ages ranged between 18 and 39 years ( $M = 19.89$ ,  $SD = 2.75$ ).

### *Stimulus Materials*

Fifty-five males and 69 females served as pretest participants to evaluate the stereotypicality and favourability of a series of personality traits. Pre-test participants were presented with a list of 50 traits (e.g. intelligent, stubborn, talkative, etc.), selected from those generally used in stereotyping research. These traits were meant to cover all possible combinations of stereotypicality for math students (stereotype-consistent, stereotype-inconsistent and stereotype-irrelevant) and favourability (positive, negative). After a description of a situation similar to the one used in the actual experiment (three friends involved in a decision-making process aimed at choosing a flat), participants were asked to judge the extent to which each trait was likely to be endorsed by a math student in the relevant situation. They responded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely likely) to 5 (extremely unlikely), with 3 (neither likely nor unlikely) as the scale midpoint. Next, participants reported for each trait whether it was favourable or unfavourable in a situation such as the one described above by ticking a plus or minus, respectively. This last measure can be seen as an index of the importance of each trait for the successful performance in the current task, and an implicit evaluation of the trait's relevance to competence.

It is difficult to generate items that show total consensus on stereotypic meaning and favourability. Thus, among the 50 pre-test traits the items with more extreme values of each category were selected to make up the self-descriptions in our studies. The ratings collected among pretest participants allowed us to distinguish the 50 traits according to whether they were (1) stereotype-inconsistent (scale values ranged between 1.00 and 2.85; mean score of 2.5), stereotype-consistent (scale values ranged

between 3.60 and 5.00; mean score of 3.96), or stereotype-irrelevant (scale value ranged between 3.00 and 3.50; mean score of 3.06) and (2) favourable (mean score of + 0.86) or unfavourable (mean score of - 0.68).

Using these criteria, we retained four traits for each of the six possible combinations of stereotypicality and favourability, making up a total of 24 traits. The stereotype-consistent traits included<sup>1</sup> *responsible, practical, reasoned, smart, rigid, stubborn, obsessive, individualistic*, the first four being positive and the last four being negative. The stereotype-inconsistent traits were *flexible, talkative, open-minded, communicative, crazy, arrogant, changeable, outlandish*, again the first four being positive and the last four being negative. Finally, the stereotype-irrelevant traits included *nice, intuitive, tolerant, innovative, inflexible, extremist, shy, selfish*, with the first four being positive and the last four being negative. These 24 traits allowed us to construct two twelve-trait profiles. For each profile, six of the twelve self-descriptive traits were positive: two consistent with the stereotype of the math students, two inconsistent with the stereotype of the math students, and two irrelevant to the stereotype. The remaining six traits were negative, two stereotype-consistent, two stereotype-inconsistent, and two stereotype-irrelevant. Stereotype-irrelevant information was included in order to increase the credibility of the profiles.

### Procedure

The procedure was similar to the Work Group paradigm developed by Goodwin *et al.* (1996). Participants were recruited to take part in a study about people's behaviours in workgroups. Participants were informed that the research was conducted in collaboration with different faculties at the University of Granada and comprised two phases. The first would be done individually on the computer in order to standardise the procedure, and the second would involve a group discussion. Each group allegedly comprised three members. In fact, the only person who participated in the study was a psychology student. Participants were also told that the two other members of the group were math students and that the three members of the group were expected to reach a decision about a flat to share. Finally, participants were told that the group discussion was to be conducted at a later time, and that they would be given an opportunity to schedule their interview at the end of the first phase of the experiment. In fact, this second phase never took place. The appointment arranged with each participant was used for debriefing purposes.

Upon their arrival at the laboratory, participants completed a questionnaire which contained a list of demographic questions. The questionnaire also included a series of

<sup>1</sup> Traits used in the pretest and in the experiment were written in Spanish: responsable, práctico, razonador, inteligente, rígido, testarudo, maniático, individualista, flexible, hablador, abierto, comunicativo, alocado, chulo, cambiante, estrafalario, simpático, intuitivo, tolerante, innovador, inflexible, extremista, tímido, egoísta. The mean score for stereotypicality (ranging between 1 and 5) and favourability (ranging between 1 and -1) were respectively: responsible (4.15, 0.89), practical (4.14, 0.96), reasoned (4.44, 0.96), smart (4.40, 0.90), rigid (3.60, -0.74), stubborn (3.7, -0.78), obsessive (3.56, -0.83), individualistic (3.71, -0.74), flexible (2.8, 0.87), talkative (2.53, 0.62), open-minded (2.72, 0.89), communicative (2.82, 0.85), crazy (2.15, -0.72), arrogant (2.41, -0.78), changeable (2.35, -0.6), outlandish (2.26, -0.54), nice (3.1, 0.87), intuitive (3.06, 0.72), tolerant (3.07, 0.89), innovative (3.13, 0.72), inflexible (2.99, -0.84), extremist (3.09, -0.87), shy (3.02, -0.73), and selfish (3.02, -0.91).

questions about participants' past experience regarding groupwork. The inclusion of these items was meant to reinforce the cover story.

Next, participants were asked to read information (displayed on the computer screen) about the goals of the group task and about the other members of the group. The task was said to involve choosing the best hypothetical flat to share, among a series of options. Participants were told that there was only one correct answer, so that they should work hard to find it. Before the screen displayed the information about their groupmates, participants received instructions concerning the power they would have over their groupmates. In the *powerful* condition, participants received instructions that they would be required to decide what might be done and who would do it in order to win the two prizes being offered (two CDs). Participants learned that they were assigned the role of leader and would automatically receive one of the two CDs that the group could win. They were told that the other CD would be for the person whom they selected on the basis of his contribution to the performance of the group. In contrast, participants in the *powerless* condition were told that their contribution would be limited to performing the tasks assigned by the leader of their group. They were informed that the leader of their group would be offered one of the CDs given to the group and decide who would win the second CD. Finally, participants in the *control* group were asked to do just the best of themselves and to try to get the two CDs for their group. They were told nothing about leaders or subordinates, so that any member of the group could win one of the two CDs if they could get them.

At the end of the instructions relative to power, participants read the target profile of the two people with whom they were supposedly going to work during the second phase of the experiment. Participants read the profile and the traits describing the first workmate followed by the profile and traits concerning the other workmate. Each profile included the name (both of them were males), age, and major of the workmate (both of them were said to be last year students in Mathematics). At the end of each profile, the computer presented twelve adjectives (supposedly self-descriptive of each future workmate). The personality traits pertaining to each workmate were presented in a random order and the two profiles were counterbalanced across participants. The traits were presented one at a time on the computer screen and participants read at their own pace. Importantly, the time taken to examine each trait was automatically collected by the computer and constituted our measure of attention.

Finally, participants were then thanked for their participation and were asked to return later in order to be fully debriefed about the actual goal of the study.

## Results

Because the irrelevant traits only served as filler information, we did not include them in the data analyses.<sup>2</sup> The profile and order of profile failed to show any influence on the data and will therefore not be discussed further. The present study thus relied on a 3 (power: powerful versus control versus powerless)  $\times$  2 (trait stereotypicality: stereotype-consistent traits versus stereotype-inconsistent traits)  $\times$  2 (trait valence: negative traits versus positive traits) mixed-factorial design with the first variable as a between-participants factor and the last two variables as within-

<sup>2</sup> A 3  $\times$  2 ANOVA (Power  $\times$  Valence) including times spent on irrelevant traits as a dependent variable did not show any main or interaction effects.



participant factors. In line with previous work on attentional processes in impression formation (Goodwin *et al.*, in press), our dependent measure was the time (recorded in milliseconds) that participants spent examining the personality traits of their supposed groupmates. There is evidence supporting the crucial role of this measure in the beginning of the stereotyping process (Quattrone, 1986) and in some studies is seen as an indicator of weight in a judgement and public responses (Fiske, 1980, Fiske and Neuberg, 1990, Goodwin *et al.*, in press). In order to eliminate the undue influence of potential outliers, we substituted all times shorter than 500 ms (0.95%) by 500 ms and all times longer than 12,000 ms (0.99%) by 12,000 ms.

Average reading times were submitted to a  $3 \times 2 \times 2$  mixed ANOVA, which showed the following results. Replicating a number of findings in the impression formation literature, and in line with hypothesis 5a, the valence of the traits had a profound impact on the time spent to read the information, as shown by the main effect of trait valence,  $F(1,93) = 13.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Specifically, participants took more time to examine the negative ( $M = 2687$ ) than the positive ( $M = 2405$ ) trait information. However, this effect was independent of power ( $p > 0.10$ ). Both powerful and powerless perceivers spent more time on negative than positive traits, although this tendency was more pronounced in the former group.

More importantly, the ANOVA also suggested that the power structure tended to influence the amount of time that participants took to examine the information,  $F(2,93) = 2.58$ ,  $p < 0.09$ . Closer examination of the relevant means confirmed hypothesis 1 for powerful participants as these participants took longer to read the information about the target ( $M = 2928$ ) than the control group ( $M = 2192$ ),  $F(1,93) = 5.13$ ,  $p < 0.03$ . Although the powerless participants showed the same trend ( $M = 2517$ ), differences between them and the control group were not significant ( $p > 0.30$ ).

As expected, the main effect of power structure was qualified by a significant interaction involving trait stereotypicality,  $F(2,93) = 5.74$ ,  $p < 0.005$ . Moreover, this two-way interaction was qualified by a significant three-way interaction involving all three factors,  $F(2,93) = 3.38$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . In order to interpret this complex interaction, we first submitted participants' reading times for the positive and negative traits to separate  $3(\text{Power}) \times 2(\text{Stereotypicality})$  mixed-design ANOVAs, using trait stereotypicality as a within-participant factor. No effect emerged for positive adjectives (see left panel of Figure 1).

In sharp contrast, the two-way interaction was highly significant for the negative traits,  $F(2,93) = 7.25$ ,  $p < 0.002$  (see right panel of Figure 1). Whereas in the control group participants took the same amount of time in reading the negative stereotype-consistent and inconsistent traits ( $M = 2396$  and  $M = 2269$  respectively,  $F < 1$ ), powerless individuals took longer to read the negative stereotype-inconsistent information ( $M = 2725$  for inconsistent traits and  $M = 2404$  for consistent ones,  $F(1,31) = 5.28$ ,  $p < 0.03$ ); and powerful participants showed the opposite pattern, spending more time on the negative stereotype-consistent traits ( $M = 3516$ ) than on the stereotype inconsistent ones ( $M = 2813$ ,  $F(1,31) = 7.51$ ,  $p < 0.02$ ).

In order to test for specific hypotheses, we performed several planned comparisons.<sup>3</sup> First, compared with the control participants, powerful perceivers'

<sup>3</sup> Bonferroni correction was used for multiple comparisons keeping the Family Wise alpha error at 0.05.

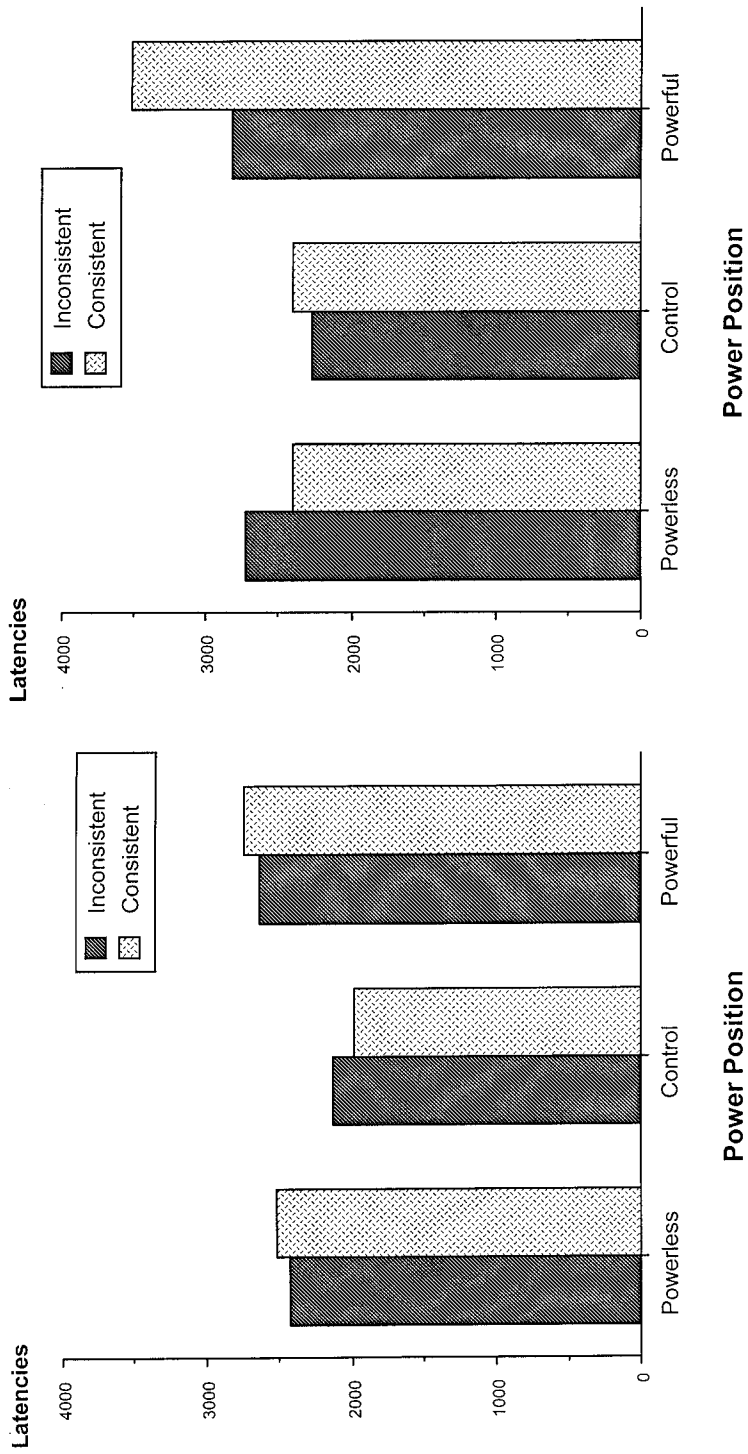


Figure 1. Mean latencies for positive traits (left panel) and negative traits (right panel) as a function of power structure and trait stereotypicality

took more time for the negative stereotype-consistent traits,  $F(1,93) = 7.90, p < 0.01$ , in line with the predicted stereotyping by design effect (hypothesis 2). Our hypothesis 3 (stereotyping by default) was not confirmed by the data. That is, powerful participants tended to spend the same amount of time, or even more, in reading negative stereotype-inconsistent information than perceivers in the control condition,  $F(1,93) = 2.57, p < 0.12$ . Regarding our hypothesis 4, there was no difference between the powerless and the control groups on negative stereotype-inconsistent traits, although, as shown above, powerless participants took more time for the negative stereotype-inconsistent traits than for the consistent ones. In sum, the powerless and powerful participants reacted quite differently from the control group. Whereas powerful participants dedicated relatively more time to read the negative stereotype-consistent than the control group, powerless participants tended to show the same pattern for negative stereotype-inconsistent information.

## Discussion

As the results showed, powerless and powerful participants seem to be motivated perceivers. Powerless tend to pay more attention to the information about the others than participants in the control group do. Moreover, and presumably concerned with the more informative traits, and especially with those which are potentially harmful for them, they tend to pay special attention to negative inconsistent traits.

Regarding the powerholders, we argued that they may reveal a number of processing strategies that would allow them to keep their power position intact. In line with this hypothesis, the present data strongly suggest that powerful participants used attentional strategies that allowed them to stereotype subordinates by design. In fact, powerholders devoted a substantial amount of attentional resources to examine stereotype-consistent traits. As such, this pattern of findings replicates earlier demonstrations of the stereotype by design process (Goodwin *et al.*, in press).

The present data provide mixed support for the presence of stereotyping by default. Although powerful participants spent less time reading the stereotype-inconsistent than stereotype-consistent information, they also tend to devote more attention to stereotype-inconsistent information than control participants.

The results regarding the role of valence in the allocation of attention resources reveal the existence of a preference for the negative facet of the stereotype when it comes to appraising subordinates. Our interpretation of this result is that powerful participants may want to pay attention to this kind of information in order to justify their power position.

Interestingly, powerful participants in Study 1 were given no strong rationale to account for their selection as the leader of the workgroup. It is thus highly likely that these participants experienced the situation as being threatening because they may not live up to the standards of what it means to be a leader. Although such a view of power as being potentially linked to feelings of threat makes intuitive sense, we are aware of no data specifically addressing the impact of differential levels of threat on powerholders' tendency to derogate subordinates. Thus, it would be desirable to explicitly manipulate the threat associated with the power position. This would allow us to ascertain in a valid way whether powerholders may be more likely to stereotype by design when their power position is otherwise threatened. We ran a second study to

better understand the conditions responsible to the emergence of the results observed in the first study. Specifically, we wanted to test the hypothesis that powerful perceivers may pay more attention to negative stereotype-consistent information when the need to secure their power position is high.

## STUDY 2

We wanted to explore the reasons leading powerful individuals to pay more attention to negative-stereotypic traits than to the rest of the information about their subordinates. More specifically, we were interested in testing whether the threat experienced by the powerholder stands as a potential cause for the kind of pattern obtained in Study 1. To address this issue, and because the strongest data from Study 1 appeared for the powerful condition, in this second study we had only powerful participants (no subordinate or control conditions were included). We created two conditions of power. In one condition, the position of powerful perceivers was made secure, i.e. participants were told that their power position was legitimate and justified. In contrast, powerful participants in the second condition were led to question the legitimacy of the power structure. We expected the individuals in this illegitimate condition to feel threatened and predicted that they would use biased information-processing strategies. Specifically, we expected that powerful participants in the illegitimate condition would focus their attention on negative stereotype-consistent information replicating the data of powerful participants in Study 1. This pattern would not emerge among the powerful participants in the legitimate condition.

### Method

#### *Participants*

Sixty-six Spanish undergraduate students of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Granada, Spain, took part in the study. They participated in the experiment for partial fulfilment of their course credits. Twenty-eight participants were males and 38 were females, equally distributed among experimental groups. Their ages ranged from 20 to 42 years ( $M = 22$  years and  $SD = 3.26$ ).

#### *Procedure*

We used the same procedure as in Study 1 except that we assigned participants to one of two groups in order to manipulate the legitimate versus illegitimate nature of power. Participants in the illegitimate power group were confronted with the same general procedure as the powerful group in Study 1 with one minor modification. In order to make the illegitimate nature of power explicit, the instructions informed participants about the random nature of the power assignment. Participants in the legitimate power condition were asked to complete a questionnaire allegedly used to measure social skills in dealing with groups. Once the questionnaire was completed,

participants were told that their high marks on the questionnaire indicated their great likelihood of success as leaders. Given their profile, participants were told that they would be the leaders of their group.

## Results

As in Study 1, participants' mean latencies were screened for the presence of anomalies (1.83% of the observations with latencies < 500 ms, and 0.51% of the observations with latencies > 12,000 ms) and were analysed by way of a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  mixed ANOVA using power legitimacy (illegitimate versus legitimate) as a between-participants factor and trait valence (favourable versus unfavourable) and trait stereotypicality (inconsistent versus consistent) as within-participant variables. Reading times were significantly higher for negative than for positive traits (2584 versus 2376 ms, respectively), as shown by the main effect of valence,  $F(1,64) = 5.44$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . The legitimacy  $\times$  stereotypicality and valence  $\times$  stereotypicality interactions were also significant,  $F(1,64) = 4.93$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , and  $F(1,64) = 4.40$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , respectively. More interestingly, however, the three-way interaction approached significance,  $F(1,64) = 2.89$ ,  $p < 0.10$ . In order to better understand the nature of this interaction, and given that it was predicted, we analysed the legitimate power and illegitimate power conditions separately.

Whereas no significant effect was found for the legitimate power condition (left panel of Figure 2), a number of marginal effects emerged in the illegitimate power condition (see right panel of Figure 2). Both the main effect of trait valence and trait stereotypicality approached significance,  $F(1,32) = 3.64$ ,  $p < 0.07$ , and  $F(1,32) = 3.84$ ,  $p < 0.06$ , respectively. Not surprisingly, participants tended to take more time to examine the negative ( $M = 2633$ ) than the positive ( $M = 2374$ ) traits. Also in line with predictions, participants used more attention resources to read the consistent ( $M = 2657$ ) than the inconsistent ( $M = 2350$ ) information. More importantly, these two effects were qualified by the predicted trait stereotypicality  $\times$  trait valence interaction,  $F(1,32) = 7.48$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . As anticipated, there was a significant difference between the attention resources devoted to the stereotype-consistent and to the stereotype-inconsistent traits when the traits were negative, such that illegitimate powerful people devoted more attentional resources to the consistent ( $M = 2934$ ) than to the inconsistent negative traits ( $M = 2332$ ),  $F(1,32) = 6.57$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . No difference emerged when the traits were positive ( $M_s = 2379$  and  $2368$  for the consistent and inconsistent traits respectively),  $F < 1$ , *ns*. Conversely, participants in the illegitimate power condition paid more attention to the consistent negative traits than to the consistent positive traits ( $M = 2379$ ),  $F(1,32) = 7.77$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Again, no difference emerged for the inconsistent traits ( $M_s = 2332$  and  $2368$  for the negative and positive traits respectively),  $F < 1$ , *ns*.

## Discussion

The results for the illegitimate and legitimate powerful conditions fully supported our hypotheses. As predicted, illegitimate powerholders paid significantly more attention to negative stereotype-consistent information than to any other kind of information. This pattern nicely replicates the results obtained in Study 1. In our view, the strategy

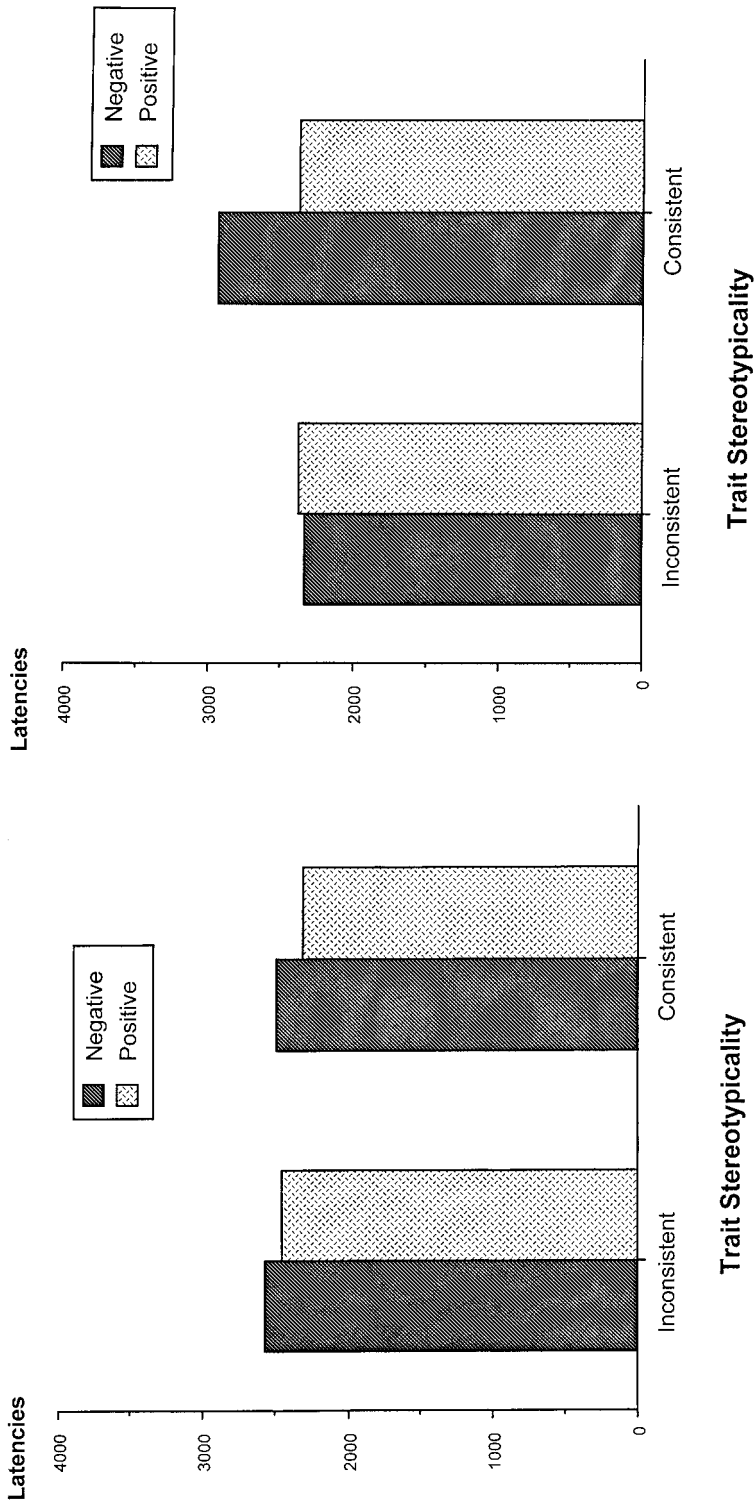


Figure 2. Mean latencies in legitimate power condition (left panel) and in illegitimate power condition (right panel) as a function of trait stereotypicality and trait valence

adopted by illegitimate powerholders may be understood in the context of the threat imposed upon them by the specific power structure used in the experiment. Because of the random assignment of power, participants were made aware that any privileged position could be disputed. To the extent that the position of the powerful participants was open to question, feelings of threat were likely to emerge. As a result, illegitimate powerholders were prompt to engage in attentional processes allowing them to justify their privileged position. Not surprisingly, then, powerful participants turned to a careful examination of the negative stereotype-consistent features of the target person.

The latencies for the legitimate power condition showed a very different pattern. Although these participants were given the same amount of control as the powerful participants in the illegitimate condition, the legitimate nature of their position oriented the impression formation in a radically different way. Quite clearly, these participants did not feel that their power position was being threatened because it was based on his or her leadership skills. As a result, they did not display any tendency to pay more attention to stereotype-consistent than to stereotype-inconsistent information. Similarly, they were not more interested in negative than in positive information.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Overall, the data from these two preliminary studies provide support for our predictions. Replicating earlier findings, we found strong evidence that powerholders stereotype subordinates *by design*, devoting more attention to stereotype-consistent information than control participants. These findings are completely in line with Goodwin *et al.*'s (in press) analysis of the role of power in motivated stereotype maintenance. Interestingly, our powerful participants did not seem to ignore stereotype-inconsistent information compared to the control group, although they paid more attention to consistent than to inconsistent information. Why our powerful participants failed to stereotype by default is not entirely clear. One explanation for this pattern takes into account the specific instructions used in the present studies. Indeed, the decision requested from powerholders directly concerned their subordinates. As a result, it may have been obvious to spend a sizeable amount of resources in order to read all the available information. Alternatively, the combined impact of the limited number of items of information and the fact that all the information could be examined at leisure minimised the pressure to neglect some kinds of information at the expense of other evidence.

A more interesting aspect of the present data concerns the impact of the valence of the information. Indeed, earlier research on power offers mixed evidence regarding the role of information valence in the impression formation episode. For instance, Goodwin *et al.* (in press) found that powerless perceivers were more likely to pay attention to positive than to negative information. As to the powerful participants, their data reveal the presence of a similar yet non-significant pattern. Using very different dependent variables, Georgesen and Harris (in press) observed that perceivers, who were made aware of their power, evaluated their partners more negatively. The present data offer strong evidence that powerful participants had their

attention attracted by the negative information. Moreover, powerful people devoted a lot of attention to the negative stereotype-consistent characteristics. This presumably allowed them to emphasise the negative component of the stereotype of their partner. Clearly, this pattern shows that the tendency to stereotype by design may be used in a strategic manner and confirms that powerful participants are not unmotivated individuals.

The data obtained in Study 2 suggest that the increased attention devoted to the negative stereotype-consistent information is strongly associated with the degree to which the power structure is perceived to be illegitimate (i.e. not clearly justified). In fact, we hypothesised that powerful participants may want to spend more time examining the negative stereotypic features of their partner because this performs an important function, namely to maintain and justify their power position. Whenever the legitimacy of the power structure is questioned, or when it is not on a solid basis, as when participants are randomly assigned to a superior position, powerholders may feel threatened. One way for powerful participants to deal with this state of affairs is to increase the legitimacy of their status by developing a negative image of subordinates. In contrast, when the power structure is seen to be legitimate, powerholders may be less inclined to devote their attentional resources to negative stereotype-consistent information. Data from the second study confirmed this conjecture: the tendency to stereotype negatively subordinates only appeared when the power position was rendered illegitimate.

Globally, our results underline the importance of articulating the cognitive and social dimensions of stereotyping processes in the context of impression formation.

The present research program clearly stresses the social dimension of stereotyping. We argue that our use of stereotypes is largely determined by the context of interaction and the motivations at work (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Fiske, Lin & Neuberg, 1999; Fiske, 1993; Kunda, 1990; Leyens *et al.*, 1992, 1994). In fact, we propose that our participants paid attention to the negative stereotypic attributes of their subordinates as a way of explaining their higher position and to justify their behaviour ('I am the leader because they have not many positive personality traits and a lot of negative ones'). An increasing body of literature demonstrates the crucial role of motivations in the emergence of stereotyping (for recent examples, see Goodwin *et al.*, in press; Sinclair & Kunda, in press).

As we see it, this functional analysis of stereotyping bears strong resemblance to a number of claims made by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Almost two decades ago, Tajfel (1981) identified the three social functions of stereotypes: they serve to explain intergroup differences, to justify actions committed or planned against other groups, and to afford positive distinctiveness to the ingroup. Building upon Sherif and Sherif's (1969) seminal work on realistic group conflict, Tajfel and Turner (1979) further stressed the importance of intergroup context to understand stereotyping. The legitimacy of the social structure, the stability of the intergroup relations, and the permeability of group boundaries should all play a crucial role in the emergence of ethnocentric tendencies (Ellemers, 1993). Although our data concern interpersonal rather than intergroup relations, they are highly reminiscent of the SIT prediction that powerful people may be particularly tempted to stereotype others negatively when their own position is perceived to be illegitimate. Indeed, a major tenet of SIT is that group members engage in a variety of strategies



aimed at securing a positive self-concept. When group members who belong to so-called 'superior' groups feel threatened, they are likely to rely on intergroup comparisons in order to guarantee their positive social identity. As Tajfel argued, this situation is likely to generate a substantial amount of psychological conflict that can only be solved through finding new justifications for the maintenance of status quo.

By the bias toward the negative stereotype-consistent information about their subordinates, powerful individuals create a form of psychological positive distinctiveness from 'the others' that justifies their higher position. As some contributions on social and individual functions of stereotypes have suggested (Huici, 1984), perceiving powerless individuals as a homogeneous set of incompetent people allows power-holders to legitimate their power. This phenomenon may be linked to recent work relating the content of stereotypes and the structural aspects of group relations (Glick & Fiske, in press).

Recently, Fein and Spencer (1997) have suggested that negatively evaluating a stereotyped target can restore one's self-image even if group evaluations and in-group/out-group comparisons are not made. This could be also a plausible explanation of our data, because in the current studies there is no evidence that people make in-group evaluations or comparisons. Although targets belonged to an out-group, the threats to the powerful position were directed to the self. However, the results of Fein and Spencer and our own suggest the interplay between individual and group motivations when people try to restore a threatened self-image. In their case when perceivers encountered someone who was a member of a group for which they do not have strong or accessible negative stereotypes, stereotyping or derogation was unlikely to be used as a self-affirmation strategy. In our studies if the main participants motivation were uniquely to restore threaten self-esteem, then this goal could be achieved by paying attention to the overall negative information, not specifically to negative stereotypic information.

We would like to stress that there was no explicit threat to the self-esteem of participants in the illegitimate power condition. Participants in this condition were simply told that their selection was based on a random procedure. Whereas the rationale mentioned to the legitimate participants can clearly be seen as a legitimate one, matters may be somewhat less straightforward in the illegitimate condition. Further research is needed in order to confirm whether our results are replicated (or even enhanced) when an explicitly illegitimate condition is created (for example, participants are told that they are selected to be the leaders despite the fact that they are clearly incompetent on the selection task).

The tendency for privileged people to concentrate on the negative features of the powerless could also be related to the belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980). It is our contention that social systems promoting the idea that individuals enjoy equal opportunities may be especially prone to trigger justification processes on the part of the powerholders. Because liberal and democratic ideologies are associated with the idea that inherent features of people explain their relative position in the social structure, differences among individuals should be based on personality characteristics. Merit is always a comparative matter. Some are good because others are not as good as they are. According to Lerner (1980), if the world is believed to be a just place, then instances of 'unfairness' must be misperceptions which create feelings of discomfort. The present research is somewhat different as it focuses on the feeling of

threat experienced by the powerful perceivers when their position is questioned. It remains that both perspectives have a lot in common.

Our results suggest that it is not only the fact of having/not having power *per se* the factor which is responsible for the attentional pattern found, but the kind of power people have. The different pattern sustained by powerholders in Study 1 did not appear in Study 2 when power was legitimate. However, alternative explanations of the observed differences in our studies between what we label legitimate and illegitimate powerful individuals are plausible. For instance, it would be possible that legitimate powerful individuals were in a more positive mood than illegitimate ones and this factor might have been responsible for the increased reliance on stereotype-consistent knowledge (Bless, Schwarz & Kimmelmeier, 1996), although not necessarily on negative stereotype-consistent information, as our data show. Further research is needed to confirm that it is the search for legitimacy or justification of people in power positions that leads to a bias toward negative stereotype-consistent information about powerless individuals, and not another motivation such as enhanced mood or the need to restore one's self-image.

Our studies examined only the time devoted to the information presented. Future research should confirm that attention devoted to negative stereotype-consistent information is related to people's judgements and behaviours.

## CONCLUSION

Present studies show that powerful perceivers may engage in a variety of effortful stereotype-based impression-formation processes. Our findings regarding stereotype by design are congruent with other work recently carried out under the general umbrella of the Continuum model (Goodwin *et al.*, in press). They also extend earlier work by stressing the importance of the valence of information (for a related view, see Georgesen & Harris, in press). Finally, they show that powerful perceivers may be more or less motivated to stereotype others in negative stereotype-consistent ways depending on the nature of the social context. This paper offers evidence that the perceived legitimacy of the particular power structure is a critical issue in the emergence of the stereotype by design process on the part of powerholders. The main lesson of the present work is that cognitive processes such as stereotyping and social perception may be significantly more influenced by social interdependence structure than traditional social cognitive researchers have generally suspected.

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