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Judgeability in Person Perception: The Confidence of Leaders

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Leaders are often expected to evaluate their team workers. In the present study, the authors investigated the hypothesis that leaders express social judgments with more confidence than subordinates. Leadership is assumed to play the role of a meta-informational cue leading people to feel entitled to judge. In Study 1, supervisors in a Portuguese firm expressed their evaluations of colleagues and superiors. In Study 2, leadership was attributed on the basis of alleged competence. In Study 3, leadership was explicitly attributed on a random basis. The results of the 3 studies support the hypothesis and are discussed within the framework of social judgeability theory (J. P. Leyens, V. Y. Yzerbyt, & G. Schadron, 1992, 1994). The confidence of leaders may become a norm that is constructed by others. Practical implications are discussed. To the same extent that leadership often resides in the eyes of followers, confidence may originate in the mind of leaders.

People possess specific theories about how leaders should behave and which personality traits they should have. Status and power are intimately linked to leadership (Eden & Leviatan, 1975). Indeed, leadership usually affords prestige (i.e., high status), and it typically allows control over subordinates (i.e., power). Numerous studies have investigated how status differences affect expectations about individual performances and, hence, inequalities of power within groups (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). More rarely have psychologists looked at the behavior of high-status, powerful persons outside the framework of specific task performances (for exceptions, see Goodwin, Operario, & Fiske, 1998). For instance, social psychologists have focused considerable attention on understanding how people form impressions of one another (e.g., Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Only a few studies, however, have focused on the influence of status and power in the processes of impression formation. Nevertheless, this question is of utmost importance, because leaders often have to evaluate their peers and subordinates. In the present article, we focus primarily on the status dimension of leaders for the sake of simplicity, and we examine whether leadership elicits the delusion that status, or prestige, affords general knowledge. Advertisements or talk shows, for instance, often show movie or sports stars who seem to know "everything." Are these people sure that they really know what they are talking about?

Status and Judgeability

Several models of impression formation have examined how people integrate categorical and individuating information to express a judgment (Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). Depending on the model, motivation, cognitive resources, and past knowledge are emphasized. The expression of a social judgment, however, is determined not only by the content of the information but also by judgeability norms or standards (Goodwin & Fiske, 1996). According to social judgeability theory (Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadron, 1992, 1994), perceivers are not only driven by data and theories about data, but also by their theo-

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ries about judgments: There are conditions that dictate whether a particular judgment may be expressed in a specific situation (Leyens, 1993; Leyens et al., 1992, 1994).

A well-established judgeability norm is that people should not judge an individual merely on the basis of categorical information (Darley & Gross, 1983). Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens, and Rocher (1994) illustrated both this rule and the fact that people are easily deluded about it. Participants in their studies refrained from judging a target person when knowing only his profession. In contrast, they did not hesitate to express a judgment when they were induced to believe that they had received individuating information about the target, although they had received none. In fact, their judgment was stereotypical because the only information sustaining it was categorical. Illusion of subliminal information was used in Yzerbyt et al.'s (1994) study (see also Gill, Swann, & Silvera, 1998; Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Corneille, 1998). Rhetoric or structure of the information constitutes another way to convince people that they really have information when there is none (Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Schadron, 1997). Real-life circumstances provide people with a gamut of means to set up a feeling of judgeability. Psychologists will not hesitate to diagnose their patients on the basis of the thickness of their files (Mischel, 1968). Jurors will deliver convinced verdicts because eyewitnesses spoke with assertiveness (Loftus, 1979).

The preceding data suggest that people judge others when they feel entitled to do so. In other words, people express social judgments when they are in a position to judge. In the present study, we took this latter statement literally and tested the hypothesis that the mere leader status with which people are invested can give them the impression that they may be confident in their judgment. More specifically, we expect that leaders will be more confident in their judgments than subordinates. Presumably, the high status of the leader should make the target seem more judgeable. Several streams of research indirectly support this hypothesis.

To the same extent that an audience is more easily persuaded by a high-status person than by a low-status one (for a review, see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), high-status individuals can persuade themselves that they, indeed, "know people" because of their superior position. For instance, it has been shown that leaders believe that their actions influence others' behaviors (e.g., Kruglanski, 1970; Strickland, 1958). It has also been shown that legitimacy of leadership increases the probability that leaders will take initiatives. Elected leaders make riskier decisions (Clark & Sechrest, 1976) and deviate more from their subordinates' recommendations than imposed leaders (Hollander & Julian, 1970). Legitimate leaders have a special *idiosyncrasy credit,* according to Hollander (1985). In our opinion, such reactions may well reflect a greater confidence among leaders.

Keltner and Robinson (1997; Robinson & Keltner, 1996; Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995), on the other hand, showed that, in comparison with low-status persons, individuals with high status and power exaggerate differences of opinions between themselves and their lower status rivals. Keltner and Robinson (1997) explained these results by the fact that power holders are less motivated to be accurate than subordinates. To the extent that extremity of judgments often correlates with confidence, Keltner and Robinson's data are in line with our hypothesis.

According to social judgeability theory (Leyens et al., 1992, 1994), however, status per se, independently of motivation or idiosyncrasy credit, may be sufficient to induce greater confidence among leaders. When people believe, correctly or not, that they are in a position to judge, they express their judgment with confidence. High status is a meta-informational cue leading people to believe that they are entitled to judge.

Three studies were conducted to test the general hypothesis. Study 1 took place in a small industry setting, and the participants were either workers or supervisors. All evaluated a colleague and a superior, and they provided confidence ratings for their evaluations. Because status was a natural variable in Study 1, it was manipulated in Study 2. Students were randomly assigned the status of leader, member, or subordinate. This status was intended to reflect their knowledge about the European Community (EC). All participants answered questions about the behavior of an unknown person and rated their confidence in their responses. To decrease the possibility of a "glow of success effect," leader and subordinate roles were assigned on an explicit random basis in Study 3.

The task was the same as the one used in Study 2.

Study 1

Participants were workers or supervisors in a small industry. Each worker evaluated a colleague and his supervisor; each supervisor evaluated a colleague and his chief. It was not possible to have lower status persons as targets. Including lower status targets would have required testing third-level chiefs, and there were simply not enough of them present in the organization. The presence of superior status targets is important for our reasoning. If one follows Keltner and Robinson's reasoning (1997; see also Fiske & Dépret, 1996), power holders are often inaccurate in their judgments (i.e., too extreme or too confident) because they lack motivation to attend carefully to relevant information. Subordinates, on the other hand, do not lack such motivation when they form impressions of higher status people, because their fate depends on these higher status targets. This type of explanation, in terms of motivation, would be difficult to maintain if the status of the judges rather than the status of the targets influenced confidence in the ratings. Such a result would, at least, suggest that the judges' status per se could be associated with confidence. We therefore expected that higher status persons would show more confidence than subordinates, independently of the status of the targets.

Method

Participants. Twenty-three men volunteered to participate individually in a research project. No incentive was promised or given. Participants belonged to an organization with a five-level hierarchy. They were either white-collar workers (first level) or first-line supervisors (second level).

Procedure. Participants were asked to take part anonymously in a study of performance appraisal. They were to report on a 5-point scale the usual performance of a target person, identified by his name, and to rate their confidence in their evaluation on an 11-point scale ranging from −5 (*not at all confident*) to 5 (*totally confident*). They then followed the same procedure for a second target person, again identified by his name. At the end of the session, participants were debriefed and thanked for taking part.

Half of the participants initially rated a colleague and then rated a higher status person. The order of the evaluations was reversed for the remaining participants. Order of presentation effects were not significant and are not discussed further. Therefore, all of the results were analyzed according to a 2 (participant status: supervisor vs. worker) × 2 (target person: same vs. superior status) analysis of variance in which status was a between-subjects variable and target was a within-subject variable.

Results and Discussion

Evaluation of performance. No significant differences emerged for evaluation of performance, either for the participants, $F(1, 21) = 0.00$, *ns,* or for the targets, $F(1, 21) = 1.38$, $p < .25$. This lack of significant results seems to suggest that the potential differences in confidence cannot be attributed to variations in performances or in the criteria designed to gauge these performances.

Confidence ratings. As expected, the main effect for status was significant, $F(1, 19) = 9.77$, $p < .005$, $\eta^2 = .34$. As can be seen in Table 1, the amount of confidence was greater among supervisors ($M = 3.45$) than among workers ($M = 2.15$). No other effect was significant. The target's status did not make a difference, and it did not interact with the participant's status.

The findings of this field study support our

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Confidence Ratings as Functions of the Status of the Judges and of the Targets

	Status of judges	
Target	Supervisor	Worker
Colleague		
M	3.5	2.0
SD	1.1	1.2
n	13	10
Superior		
M	3.4	2.3
SD	0.9	1.4
n	13	10

Note. The rating scale ranged from −5 (*no confidence at all*) to 5 (*total confidence*).

hypothesis that a leader feels more confident in expressing a judgment about a target than a lower status individual. Higher confidence among leaders occurred independently of the position of the judges relative to the targets. Supervisors felt more confident than workers when they judged either a colleague or one of their chiefs. It therefore seems that, in our setting, greater confidence cannot be attributed to a lack of motivation on the part of the supervisors.

Status hierarchies often develop from the general expectations that people form about members' likely value for the group (Berger et al., 1977; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). It might therefore be argued that people became supervisors because of their experience and greater confidence. A second study addressed this problem.

Study 2

This study had two goals. First, we wanted to show that leader's status influences confidence for judgments that rely on no information whatsoever. In other words, the attribution of leader's status provides confidence for judgments for which there is neither previous experience nor actual basis. Second, we were interested in determining whether, in such circumstances, confidence would be apparent for specific judgments or as a general impression embodying the different specific judgments. We expected that there would be overall confidence due to leader status but were unsure that specific judgments would be made more confidently. As a means of ensuring the internal validity of the results, two independent waves of participants were tested at different times by the same experimenter and following the same procedure.

Method

Participants. Sixty-three students (age range: 19–23 years; 30 women and 33 men) in a management college took part in the first wave. Sixty students at a different management college (age range: 19–23 years; 32 women and 28 men) participated in the second wave. They were recruited outside classes to participate in a research project. No special incentive was promised or given. Participants completed the study in groups varying from 10 to 16. In each wave, one third of the participants were assigned the role of leader; another third were assigned the role of member, and the remaining participants were subordinates. Because there was no effect of gender, the design was thus a 3 (participant status: leader vs. member vs. subordinate) × 2 (wave: first vs. second) factorial with the two variables as between-subjects variables.

Procedure. On their arrival, participants were told by the experimenter that the research was designed as a method for selecting people who would work in teams and organize a European youth conference. First, participants completed a questionnaire about knowledge concerning the EC. To ensure confidentiality, they identified themselves by a personal code number. When the questionnaires were completed, the experimenter collected them and left the room, informing the participants that he would be back in 20 min with the results of the questionnaires. During the alleged tabulation of the questionnaires, students completed a filler task; they were required to spot underlined words in a text and write them down in a special column. On his return, the experimenter distributed to each of the participants, according to their code number, written feedback. Actually, participants randomly received feedback indicating that, in regard to the team, they would be a leader, a member, or a subordinate.

Participants in the leader condition were given the feedback that they were extremely well informed about the EC. As a result, they could be team leaders and had to read the application form of another student who could be on their team and work under their instructions. Participants in the member condition were told that they were reasonably well informed about the EC and could be team members. They received the application of another potential comember of the team. Participants in the subordinate condition were told that they were not very well informed about the EC and that they could be members of a team led by another student whose application form they would read. The application form contained nondiagnostic information: name (e.g., John M.), address (unknown street in town), age (21 years), nationality (Portuguese), and application date.

Provided with the "application form," participants were asked to complete a 15-item questionnaire about the day-to-day life of the target

person (e.g., "goes out clubbing at least twice a week"). Each item had to be answered true, false, or don't know and was not at all related to European matters. After having completed the questionnaire, participants rated their overall confidence about their answers on an 11-point scale ranging from −5 (*not at all confident*) to 5 (*totally confident*). Finally, as a manipulation check, participants were asked what their and the target's roles were on the team; there were no incorrect responses for these two questions. All participants were completely debriefed and thanked for taking part.

Results and Discussion

Day-to-day life questionnaire. The number of "don't know" answers served as a measure of confidence for the specific judgments (see Yzerbyt et al., 1994). Indeed, not responding "true" or "false" meant that participants were unsure about the answer to an item. Participants' status did not influence this measure of confidence, $F(2, 117) = 0.28$, *ns*.

Overall confidence. As expected, the main effect for status was significant, $F(2, 117) = 7.10$, $p < .002$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Paired comparisons of means were performed with the Newman–Keuls test. As can be seen in Table 2, confidence ratings were significantly higher in the leader condition than in the other two conditions, which did not differ from each other. The effect of wave was not significant, $F < 1$.

Because participants sometimes answered "don't know" to the items relevant to the life of the unknown target, one could argue that overall confidence simply indicates that participants are confident that they "don't know." This interpretation is unlikely. First, the don't know responses represented only a small proportion ($M = 2.8$ of 15) of the answers. Second, the overall confidence was meant to reflect one's trust for all types of answers. Third, there was no difference between conditions in terms of don't know answers, whereas there was a significant difference in regard to overall confidence. It remains, therefore, to explain why leaders are, in general, more confident than those of lower status.

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Confidence Ratings as Functions of the Status of the Judges

	Status of judges		
Wave	Leader	Member	Subordinate
First			
M	2.4_a	0.9_b	0.6_b
SD	2.0	2.2	2.8
n	21	21	21
Second			
M	2.5_a	0.8_b	0.7_b
SD	2.0	2.9	2.1
n	20	20	20

Note. Within rows, means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .01$ or better (Newman–Keuls test). The rating scale ranged from −5 (*no confidence at all*) to 5 (*total confidence*).

The difference in confidence patterns could be explained by a "glow of success effect." Because leader's status was linked to performance, high status may have induced positive affect. When amount of potential loss is inconsequential, as in the present studies, people who feel happy tend to lean toward greater risk (Isen, Means, Patrick, & Nowicki, 1982). Also, they simplify complex situations and more rapidly reach a solution (Isen & Means, 1983; for a review, see Isen, 1987). Positive affect due to performance cannot be ruled out.

However, when judges had to predict specific behaviors of a target about whom they had no information, status did not make a difference. In other words, potential leaders were not more confident than members or subordinates when they had to answer specific questions about the habits of a person they knew nothing about. Their only belief was that this person did not respond as well as they did to a questionnaire concerning the EU; this belief was useless, however, because there was no link between the personal questionnaire and the EU one. By contrast, they showed more confidence about the general profile of their various answers.

The "glow of success effect" cannot explain the differential level of confidence of leaders in regard to specific and global responses. Nevertheless, it was specifically addressed in a third study.

Study 3

The same experimenter as in Studies 1 and 2 replicated the procedure used in Study 2 but explicitly afforded leadership on a random basis. Half of the participants were assigned the

status of leader, and the remaining participants were assigned the status of subordinate. We expected that leaders would show more overall confidence in their ratings of an unknown target.

Method

Twenty-eight students in computer science classes (age range: 20–22 years; 12 women and 16 men) took part in the study without the promise of any incentive. After completion of a questionnaire about general knowledge concerning the EU, the experimenter explained that he would distribute, on a random basis, roles for an activity related to the EU. Participants were each given a number from 1 to 28 and shown a table of random numbers. With a photocopy of the table in his hands, the experimenter called each number and distributed the different roles. At that point, it was obvious that all participants noticed that their specific role had been the result of chance. Half of the participants learned that they were leaders, and the other half learned that they were subordinates. Contrary to Study 2, there was no "member" status. Indeed, this level of status was absent in Study 1, and it did not lead to specific results in Study 2. Finally, the experimenter distributed the booklets concerning the unknown target. The information concerning the target was the same as in Study 2. The design thus comprised two conditions, leader and subordinate, and the dependent variables were number of "don't know" answers and overall confidence.

Results and Discussion

Replicating the finding of Study 2, no difference appeared for the day-to-day questionnaire (Ms = 3.0 and 3.1 in the leader and subordinate conditions, respectively), $F < 1$. Consistent with the previous findings, and as expected, overall confidence was significant, $F(1, 26) = 9.78$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .27$. The leaders ($M = 2.6$) expressed more confidence than the subordinates ($M = 0.07$).

The levels of overall confidence in both conditions were very close to the ones found in Study 2. This similarity is remarkable because it does not support an idiosyncrasy credit explanation of the results. When leadership was "legitimately" attributed on the basis of competence, leaders and subordinates were not more or less confident in their overall judgments than when status was explicitly attributed to chance.

Participants were randomly assigned to the roles of leader and subordinate to reduce the plausibility of "the glow of success." As mentioned earlier, this interpretation is weakened by the different results obtained for the two kinds of confidence. Even in Study 3, however, it cannot be completely ruled out because, as in a lottery, the good luck of being assigned leader status may have produced elevated mood. Obviously, further research is needed to clarify this point. One way of accomplishing this goal may be to manipulate mood at the same time that roles are distributed on a random basis.[1]

We also conducted a meta-analysis on the three sets of data (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1984). The mean effect size (r) was .34 ($p < .0001$). In other words, the variance accounted for by the status variable was above 11%.

General Discussion

The three studies reported in this article tell the same story. They support the hypothesis that greater confidence in one's judgments is associated with status. There was a medium effect of status, as shown in the meta-analysis (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1984).

Reliability of Power Holders

Although leaders in the experimental studies were not given the opportunity to exert control over subordinates, supervisors in the field study had power over the workers. It is thus relevant to link the present data to previous work indicating that powerful people tend to confirm their expectations about other people (see Fiske & Dépret, 1996; Goodwin et al., 1998). Fiske and colleagues have shown that powerful people stereotype individuals whose resources they control. They do so by default, overlooking inconsistent information, and by design, confirming their expectations. Goodwin and Fiske (1996) also speculated that powerful individuals might have less stringent judgeability norms than less powerful individuals. Often, they do

[1] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

not have the time to scrutinize the available information and resort to quick decisions. Also, they are less likely to suffer from inadequate decisions. The same reasoning was followed by Keltner and Robinson (1997; Robinson & Keltner, 1996; Robinson et al., 1995).

As an addition to this literature on power, our findings illustrate the fact that leader status is often interpreted as "natural knowledge." More specifically, we believe that our findings show the effect of a social norm in person perception. One could label this norm "reliability of the power holder." In other words, powerful, high-status individuals feel confident about evaluating others simply because of their power or leadership status. Some media stars probably provide the best example of this "natural knowledge" belief. Whenever interviewed on television or in journals, some of these individuals have strong opinions about everything and consider themselves more knowledgeable than real experts. The "reliability of the power holder" may also explain why many clinical psychologists do not hesitate to deliver a diagnostic on such scant information as age, sex, race, religion, profession, and so forth (e.g., Rubin & Shontz, 1960; Sines, 1959; for a review, see Leyens, 1983). After all, clinical psychologists are experts when it comes to mental disorders.

Such an interpretation is in line with other findings gathered in the framework of social judgeability theory (Leyens et al., 1992, 1994). Yzerbyt et al. (1994) have shown that individuals will not judge someone on the mere basis of group membership but will do so when they believe that their judgment is based on individuating information about the target (see also Gill et al., 1998). The present article suggests that the illusion of information may also derive from the interaction context in which a judgment is emitted. This social context can, in itself, induce perceivers to believe that they possess relevant information or sufficient expertise, and thus it can contribute to the feeling of target judgeability.

Tentatively, we thus defend the hypothesis that leader status produces confidence. Other researchers may well consider that status derives from confidence. According to the theory of status characteristics and expectation states (Berger et al., 1980), "a status characteristic is any characteristic around which expectations and beliefs about actors come to be organized" (Berger, Fisek, & Norman, 1989, p. 103). These expectations and beliefs, in turn, contribute to inequalities within face-to-face groups when the status is implemented. In other words, for these theorists, status is attributed by people on the basis of performance (e.g., confidence) or social categories (e.g., Foschi, 1989). This reversal of perspective does not mean that the theory of status characteristics and expectation states is irrelevant for our purpose. Rather, the contrary is the case.

A Shared Belief

How can one explain the existence, and survival, of the "reliability of the power holder norm?" Could it be that it is constructed by the reactions of others? This is exactly what status characteristics theorists would propose (Berger et al., 1980). In the earlier-mentioned example of media stars, the reaction of the public and of the media certainly contributes to creating among these stars the belief that they "naturally" know everything. If it were not the case, why would people continue to interview them about anything?

In a clever study, Humphrey (1985) randomly divided his participants into leaders and subordinates. Leaders received interesting and coordinating tasks, whereas subordinates complied with orders and worked on dull tasks. Afterward, both subordinates and leaders agreed that leaders were better able to take responsible roles. Also, a classical study conducted by Thibaut and Riecken (1955) showed that people attributed more degrees of freedom for their behavior to high-status persons than to low-status persons. This larger amplitude in behaviors may well coincide with an attribution of more and better information.

Research on obedience tells the same story (Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1986; Milgram, 1974; Miller, 1986). The extraordinary facility with which people comply with "strange" orders can only give to those in power the impression that they are indeed omnipotent and omniscient. Moreover, obeying an apparently legitimate authority must lead obedient participants to believe that they did what needed to be done in the eyes of competent people. Such a view is in line with Eden and Leviatan's (1975) research showing that leadership resides in the eyes of followers.

Noninnocent Consequences

If confidence is part of the "romanticized" conception of leadership (Meindl, 1995), the consequences may be important. We have already alluded to the literature on persuasion (e.g., Bohner, Moskowitz, & Chaiken, 1995; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and eyewitness testimonies (Loftus, 1979). Numerous studies testify that high status, power, and assertiveness can sometimes suffice to influence an audience. If people of high status or power realize that they are able to achieve their goals through their confidence or assertiveness, they have no reason to change their behavior.

Such a belief in the effectiveness of their behavior may explain why powerful persons continue to stereotype subordinates in spite of contradicting evidence (Goodwin et al., 1998). It can also explain Janis's (1982, 1989) phenomenon of "groupthink" in which confident leaders persist in their erroneous decisions and are not contradicted by loyal and trustful subordinates. Psychologists themselves are prone to consider their status superior to that of their clients and may thus be convinced that their diagnosis is inevitably correct (Leyens, 1983). These few examples should suffice to show that undue confidence in the minds of leaders may cause problems at the interpersonal, group, and intergroup levels.

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