Perceptions of Power in Conflict Situations[1]

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Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (1973), 28 (2), 155-62

[1] The authors express thanks to Martha Burt and Sharon Guten for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article and to Dan Moore and T. Michael Carter for their assistance in obtaining subjects. Data analysis at the Madison Academic Computing Center of the University of Wisconsin was made possible through support in part from the National Science Foundation and the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation.
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Abstract

Subjects rendered judgments regarding the power of the participants in a series of conflictual circumstances where an adversary threatened a target. These situations manipulated four independent variables: *(a)* the adversary's capacity to damage the target's interests, (6) the adversary's probability of actually attacking, (c) the target's ability to block the impending attack, and *(d)* the target's capacity to retaliate. Results showed that all of the independent variables affected the subjects' judgments of the adversary's power, while three of them (damage, blockage, and retaliation) affected judgments of the target's power. Differences in the predictive equations for judgments of adversary power and target power were noted, and a theoretical model was formulated to explain these differences. This model, cast in terms of the patterns of control exercised over valued outcomes, sharpened the focus on remaining issues in power perception.

Perceptions of Power in Conflict Situations

General Erwin Rommel arrived in North Africa in February, 1941, to assume command of the German panzer forces. At that time, the Afrika Korps had few tanks, and Rommel, concerned with this deficiency, quickly ordered his workshops to fabricate dummy tank frames suitable for mounting on a Volkswagen chassis. These vehicles, which included devices to churn up trailing clouds of dust, created the impression of enormous armored strength when viewed at a distance across the arid desert terrain (Lewin, 1968). The astute German commander understood the tactical importance of power perception. In adversary situations involving confrontations of force, the mere appearance of strength can rival the real thing.

What information does an individual use in assessing the strength of an adversary? Are certain data more central than others in shaping such impressions? These are important questions because judgments about power are crucial in situations of conflict. Tactical decisions often hinge on judgments about relative power, and the outcome of a clash may depend on the accuracy of these judgments. Any misjudgment of an opponent's true capabilities—either an underestimate or an overestimate—may create untoward consequences. Thus, if an opponent can manipulate a target's impression of their relative power capabilities, he can probably affect the target's reaction.

The research reported in this article treats power perceptions in conflictual encounters where coercion and force are used. Focusing on confrontations between antagonists who can obstruct one another's valued outcomes, this research investigates factors that determine impressions of power.

Previous Research on Power Perception

Previous research on the perception of power has been narrow in scope, and there apparently exists no broad-based theory of attributed power. In approaching the available literature, however, it is useful to think in terms of a conflictual situation involving a sequence of attack and counterattack. As Swingle (1970) noted, persons in severe discord may define the interaction in terms of the offensive and defensive capabilities of the opposing parties. Offensive potential refers to the capacity of one opponent to initiate attacks against the interests of another. Existing literature on power perception distinguishes between the *magnitude of damage* that an attacker can potentially inflict on the target and his *probability* of actually exercising control over the target. In contrast, defensive potential denotes the target's ability to *block* the attacker's efforts and to *retaliate* after the aggressor has struck an initial blow. All of these variables—damage, probability, blockage, and retaliation—characterize situations of conflict and consequently may affect perceptions of power.

Previous research offers no more than limited evidence regarding the effects of the four variables (damage, probability, blockage, and retaliation) on attributed power. The clearest evidence concerns damage, which indexes the extent to which an adversary can exercise control over the outcomes valuable to the target. Several studies have found that the greater the damage an antagonist can inflict, the more powerful he is judged to be. Employing diverse measures of attributed power, studies by Teger (1970), Johnson and Ewens (1971), and Michener, Griffith, and Palmer (1971) have demonstrated this effect for individual opponents. The same effect holds for conflictual situations in which the stimulus objects are coalitions rather than lone individuals (Michener & Zeller, 1972). And Chu (1966) reported similar results for nonhuman adversaries capable of damaging the target person.

Other research shows that a second factor, the probability that the antagonist will actually lambaste the target, also affects ascribed power. Schelling (1960) has argued that the manipulation of perceived probability (as by intentionally committing oneself to an apparently irrevocable line of action) constitutes an important tactic in bargaining. Moreover, various empirical studies (Benton, Gelber, Kelley, & Liebling, 1969; Chu, 1966; Faley & Tedeschi, 1971; Horai, Haber, Tedeschi, & Smith, 1970) indicate that persons impute more potency to opponents having a high likelihood of using their offensive capabilities than to those manifesting a lower likelihood.

But these two factors, damage and probability, characterize only the aggressor's abilities, not the target's. Assessments of an adversary's power (and of the target's own power) may reflect not only what the adversary can and/or will do but also the defensive ripostes possible in the situation. Surprisingly, the capacity to block attacks has apparently received little attention as a factor affecting ascribed power. Nevertheless, the present conceptualization of conflictual encounters as involving both offense and defense implies that blockage should affect imputed power. Blockage indicates the extent to which the target can neutralize an attack and retain control of outcomes he values. The target is likely to view an easily neutralized adversary as less powerful than one who cannot be checked.

A final factor, the target's ability to retaliate, may also color judgments of power, although one might speculate that it influences impressions of the target's power more than impressions of the adversary's. Research by Tedeschi, Bonoma, and Novinson (1970), which used the potency dimension of the semantic differential scale as a measure of attributed power, found that subjects ascribed greater potency to targets who wielded retaliatory capacity than to those who did not, although inconclusive results for the control group render these findings

provisional. One may nevertheless hypothesize that in general the capacity to retaliate affects perceived power. Because retaliation refers to the target's ability to exert control over outcomes valuable to the adversary, more power may be ascribed to the adversary under low retaliation than under high; similarly, the target of the attack should be adjudged stronger under high retaliation than under low.

The present study extends previous work on the perception of power. Limited to situations involving an attacker and a target, it investigates how persons syncretize information relevant to power. That is, it inquires how persons combine diverse information in arriving at judgments of power. Specifically, it broaches the following questions: *(a)* Do each of the four independent variables—damage, probability, blockage, and retaliation—affect the amount of power ascribed to the adversary? *(b)* Do they also affect assessments of the target's power? (c) Do the independent variables affect each of these judgments in the same way? That is, are the predictive equations for the target's power and the adversary's power similar? *(d)* Are there some underlying commonalities in the judgments of the adversary's and the target's power that provide a basis for a general theory of power perception?

Method

Subjects

This study employed a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design (i.e., Damage X Probability X Blockage X Retaliation). The sample consisted of 288 undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin. Half of the subjects were male and half were female, and they represented the four undergraduate levels (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) approximately in proportion to enrollment. As a group, the subjects possessed no special knowledge about social power or about perceptions of power. Data collection occurred in five group-administered sessions of varying

size. Subjects were randomly assigned to the 16 experimental treatments with the constraint that equal numbers of males and females (i.e., 9 of each) appear in each cell of the design.

Materials

Each subject read a set of four situations; these incorporated the manipulations of the independent variables. Each situation portrayed a conflictual relationship between two parties—that is, an adversary on the attack and a target on the defense. Subjects viewed the situation from the standpoint of the target in the confrontation. Each situation conformed to a standard format, as follows: The adversary had the capability either to destroy 90% of some valued outcome (high damage) or to destroy 10% of that outcome (low damage). Simultaneously, there was either a 90% chance that the adversary would actually attempt to carry out the destruction (high probability) or a 10% chance (low probability). In turn, the target had either a 90% chance of blocking the attack (high blockage) or a 10% ' chance (low blockage). Moreover, he could retaliate against the adversary by destroying either 90% of an outcome valued by the adversary (high retaliation) or 10% of that outcome (low retaliation).

While morphologically identical, the four stimulus situations differed in their specific content. One depicted a confrontation between a salesman and his regional manager, where the manager could reduce the salesman's commission-based income by either 10% or 90% (depending on experimental treatment) and where there was either a 10% or a 90% probability that he would actually do so. On the other hand, the salesman had either a 10% or a 90% chance of blocking the manager's onslaught by appealing to a higher official in the organization, and he could retaliate by moving to another company and taking either 10% or 90% of his customers with him, thereby hurting the manager's sales record.

A second situation described an altercation between a newspaper editor and a local judge. The judge could obstruct newspaper coverage of an important trial, and the editor could block the judge's action by a lawsuit and retaliate by publishing articles that would diminish the judge's chances of reelection. Similarly, a third situation delineated a conflict between two countries with military capabilities, while the fourth treated a dispute between two congressmen where passage of a bill and campaign support were at stake.

Dependent Measures

Each subject was assigned to only one experimental treatment in the 16-cell factorial design for all four stimulus situations. The sequential ordering in which subjects read the four situations was randomized. The subjects in the role of the target responded by recording their impressions of the adversary's power and the target's power (i.e., their own power) in each situation. Specifically, they provided separate ratings for the adversary and the target on various semantic differential items, each with 9-point scales. These items, selected on the basis of face validity and usage in previous studies of power perception (Heise, 1970; Johnson & Ewens, 1971; Pruitt & Johnson, 1970), included: powerful-powerless, threatening-not threatening, potent-not potent, dominant-submissive, tenacious-yielding, aggressive-nonaggressive, and attacking-not attacking. Besides completing the semantic differentials, subjects concurrently indicated (on 9-point scales) their level of confidence in their ratings for the adversary and the target.

For each of the four stimulus situations, the seven semantic differential scores for the adversary were added (i.e., unit weighted) to yield an adversary power score, while those for the target were summed to obtain a target power score. Using these summative scales as dependent variables, a repeated measures analysis of variance showed that there were negligible differences

between the four situations and no significant interactions between situations and the four independent variables (i.e., damage, probability, blockage, and retaliation); this is not surprising, of course, because the four situations were designed to be structurally isomorphic.

Next, since any given subject was in the same experimental treatment for all four situations, the four scores for the adversary's power (i.e., one score for each situation) were summed to create a single score, and the four scores for the target's power were summed to create a single score. Thus, for purposes of data analysis, this study includes two major dependent variables, termed adversary power and target power.

Data from the present sample indicated that each of these dependent variables achieved a high level of reliability (internal consistency), Cronbach's alpha for adversary power was .941, while that for target power was .912.

Insert Table 1 about here

Results

Adversary Power

Table 1 presents the mean values for adversary power as a function of the four orthogonally manipulated independent variables (i.e., damage, probability, blockage, and retaliation). An analysis of variance indicates significant main effects for each of the independent variables. Adversary power is greater under high damage than under low (F = 26.3S, df = 1/272, p < .001), greater under high probability than under low (F = 158.93, df = 1/272, p <.00l), greater under low blockage than under high (F = 33.88, df = 1/272, p < .001), and greater under

low retaliation than under high (F = 31.84, df = 1/272, p < .001). Stated simply, power ascribed to an adversary is higher when the adversary can and does wreak severe damage and when the target cannot intercept the assault or do much in response.

Some of these findings correspond to those of earlier studies. The damage main effect corroborates that found by Michener and Zeller (1972) as well as that reported by Johnson and Ewens (1971). Moreover, the probability main effect replicates the finding reported by Benton et al. (1969), where probability was manipulated by varying the actual frequency of power usage. Similar probability effects emerged in the study by Horai et al. (1970). This correspondence between the present findings and earlier findings deserves notice for two reasons. First, the present findings replicate previous discoveries, which is important for the accumulation of reliable scientific information. Second, this correspondence strengthens confidence in the methodology used here. Further evidence for the adequacy of the present procedures comes from the subjects' reports of their own confidence in their ratings. Although the four independent variables had no impact on the confidence scores, the subjects expressed considerable confidence in their ratings of both the adversary and the target. On a 9-point scale the mean confidence for the target's ratings was 6.0 ("moderately confident"), while that for the adversary's ratings was 6.4.

Considered jointly, the four independent variables are important determinants of the power attributed to the adversary. The coefficient of determination (R2) is .458. Especially noteworthy is the effect of probability, which alone accounts for 29.1% of the variance in adversary power. The surprising magnitude of this effect imparts an important lesson regarding the tactical use of power: The probable deployment of a power base, regardless of the magnitude of damage implied, affects judgments of power in a pivotal fashion.

Raven and Kruglanski (1970) advanced a useful distinction between possessing a power base, threatening to use the power base, and actually using the base. The present findings suggest that the threatened likelihood of using a coercive power base—rather than mere possession of the resource—exerts a great impact on attributed power. Even persons who are outgunned or trapped in low-power positions can manipulate the power attributed to them by vigorously activating (or pretending to activate) their limited resources. The consequences for impression management seem obvious, given that one can frequently fake the probability of initiating action with relative ease.

Target Power

The four independent variables not only affect judgments regarding the adversary's power, but they also determine the power ascribed to the target. Table 2 presents the mean values for target power as a function of the independent variables. Interestingly, the pattern of effects differs from that for adversary power. The analysis of variance for the target power scores reveals a significant damage main effect (F = 13.02, df = 1/272, p < .001), a significant blockage main effect (F = 36.71, df= 1/272, p < .001), and a significant retaliation main effect (F = 27.70, df = 1/272, p < .001). No significant effect emerges for probability (F < 1). Target power is greater under low damage than under high, greater under high blockage than under low, and greater under high retaliation than under low. These independent variables are moderate determinants of target power, as indicated by the coefficient of determination (R^2 = .212).

Notice that the various independent variables affect both adversary power and target power, but the pattern of effects is different. This difference emerges clearly in a comparison of

the regression equations for the two dependent variables. The equation for adversary power (AP) is:

$$AP = +.22D + .54P - .25B - .24R + e_1, [1]$$

while that for target power (TP) is:

$$TP = -.19D + .02P + .32B + .28R + e_y. [2]$$

In these equations the independent variables are D (damage), P (probability), B (blockage), and R (retaliation). The symbols e_1 and e_2 designate stochastic disturbance terms. Since all of the variables in these equations are standardized and the independent variables are uncorrelated, the coefficients in each equation (commonly called "path coefficients") indicate the relative contributions of the various independent variables.

Equations 1 and 2 assume an underlying causal model in which adversary power is not a cause of target power and target power is not a cause of adversary power. Although the data show a significant zero-order correlation between adversary power and target power (r_{AT} = -.193), this correlation should not be construed as evidence that adversary power causes target power, or vice versa. In fact, nearly all of the covariation between the two dependent variables is produced by the independent variables, as indicated by the fact that the partial correlation between adversary power and target power, holding constant the four independent variables, is virtually zero ($r_{AT.DPBR} = -.023, ns$). Thus, this test supports a model in which the direct causal paths between the two dependent variables are essentially zero.

Insert Table 2 about here

Although the independent variables affect both adversary power and target power, they affect these outcomes differently. This is shown by the pattern of algebraic signs, which is different in Equation 1 and Equation 2. Thus, blockage and retaliation increase target power but reduce adversary power. Damage augments adversary power but diminishes target power. Some of these empirical findings are intuitively obvious, but others are not. Damage, for instance, might be expected to increase adversary power, but why should it have any effect on target power? And while retaliation plausibly determines the power ascribed to the target (who actually wields the retaliatory capacity), why does it affect adversary power?

Discussion

To explain the pattern of findings in Equations 1 and 2, a theoretical-construct model is needed. The remainder of this article, therefore, formulates a generalized model of power perception in conflict situations. Although advanced post-factum, this theory not only subsumes the equations for the two dependent variables but also generates predictions transcending the present data.

Insert Figure 1 about here

A Theory of Power Perception

The conflictual situations in the present study had several elements in common. In all cases there were two participants, an adversary and a target. And in all cases, various outcomes were at stake. Some of these outcomes were valuable to the target, while others were valuable to the adversary. For purposes of understanding Equations 1 and 2, it is useful to construe the four

independent variables (damage, probability, blockage, and retaliation) as indexes of control over these valued outcomes.

Figure 1 represents the structure common to the four situations. It depicts the two participants (target and adversary) and an outcome valuable to each. The valuable outcomes, of course, differed from situation to situation. In one situation, a salesman valued his commission-based income, while the salesman's manager wanted to retain the company's customers; in another situation, a newspaper editor wanted the opportunity to cover a trial, while the opposing judge valued his chances of reelection to office. Figure 1 delineates a situation where both participants exercise some control over both outcomes. This structure accords with the four stimulus situations viewed by the experimental subjects. In essence, the damage and probability variables indicate the extent of the adversary's control over the outcome valued by the target; the blockage variable specifies the extent of the target's control over the outcome valuable to himself; and the retaliation variable indexes the target's control over the outcome valued by the adversary.

Interestingly, Figure 1 also reveals that as a logical possibility, the adversary could exercise control over the outcome valuable to himself. Although the stimulus situations in the present study provided no information about this linkage, the patterns of control in Figure 1 convey what it might involve (one possibility, for instance, being "counterblockage," or the extent to which the adversary can obstruct the retaliatory efforts of the target).

Given the patterns of control depicted in Figure 1, a theory to explain the causal pattern in Equations 1 and 2 requires only one postulate: If a participant in a conflictual situation increases his control over any valued outcome (i.e., either an outcome that he values or an outcome that his antagonist values), the power attributed to him increases, and the power

attributed to the other person decreases. Note that control and power are not the same thing. A man, for instance, may control many outcomes, but he remains powerless if these outcomes are not valuable to someone.

Predictions derived from this postulate are elaborated in Figure 2. These derivations indicate how changes in control over outcomes affect attributed power. For example, an increase (from .1 to .9) in the target's control over the outcome valued by the target would result in an increase (+) in the power ascribed to the target and in a decrease (—) in the power ascribed to the adversary; analogously, an increase in the adversary's control over the outcome valued by the target would result in a decrease (—) in the power ascribed to the target and in an increase (+) in the power ascribed to the adversary; and so on.

Insert Figure 2 about here

In essence, the predictions summarized in Figure 2 specify the form of the equations for adversary power and target power. Using the independent variables of D (damage), P (probability), B (blockage), and R (retaliation), the equation for adversary power (AP) becomes:

$$AP = +D + P - B - R, \quad [3]$$

while that for target power (TP) becomes:

$$TP = -D - P + B + R \quad [4]$$

Since the theory predicts only the direction (not the magnitude) of the effects for the independent variables, no numerical coefficients are included in these equations.

Keeping in mind that the theory is post-factum (and therefore cannot be "proved" by the present data), compare the theoretical Equation 3 with the empirical Equation 1 (for adversary power), and compare the theoretical Equation 4 with the empirical Equation 2 (for target power).

The concordance of signs is striking, and the only disparity occurs for the effect of probability on target power, where the predicted relationship is negative but the empirical data show a nonsignificant positive relationship. All other signs are consistent.

Further Issues in Power Perception

The theory has been advanced to explain why Equations 1 and 2 assume the form they do. Since one cannot test a theory on the same data used to formulate it, future research should attempt a direct assessment. Ideally, a test of the theory would include data on all four patterns of control represented by the theory (see Figure 1). As indicated earlier, the present study includes no empirical data on one of these linkages (i.e., the adversary's control over outcomes valuable to him), and one of the theory's virtues is to point to this gap.

Although cast at a high level of generality, the theory is narrow in scope because it applies only to power perceptions in conflictual situations. But a parallel theory of power perception, stressing control over valued outcomes, might apply to cooperative, nonadversary relationships. Expansion in this direction seems possible.

The theory might also be extended to incorporate variations in value. Recent research by Rothbart (1970) showed that the value of the outcomes in an interaction may affect the perception of threat and power. And the formulation of power tactics derived from social exchange theory (Michener & Schwertfeger, 1972; Michener & Suchner, 1972) similarly stresses the value of outcomes. If the target of an attack, for instance, suddenly stopped caring about an outcome jeopardized by the adversary (i.e., used the tactic of "withdrawal"), then the adversary would effectively exercise less control over those outcomes valued in the interaction, and consequently he would be viewed as less powerful. The present study did not experimentally manipulate the values of the outcomes at stake, and the theory implicitly assumes that these

values are fixed and unchanging. Future elaborations of the theory, however, might explicitly incorporate differences in outcome values.

Finally, the role of probability in the perception of power requires further clarification. Probability should be treated as conceptually distinct from damage capability because as earlier research has shown, the fact that someone possesses a coercive power base does not necessarily imply he will actually deploy it (Michener & Cohen, 1973; Michener & Lawler, 1971). The present empirical results indicate that although the adversary's probability of attacking is an important determinant of adversary power, it has virtually no impact on target power. This may have occurred because the subjects viewed the situations from the target's role. Nevertheless, this is the only point where the theory cannot reproduce the empirical findings, and it therefore poses an interesting question for future research.

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Table 1. Mean Scores for Adversary Power

Treatment	Low damage		High damage	
	Low probability	High probability	Low probability	High probability
High blockage				
High retaliation	111.2	142.8	116.8	152.3
Low retaliation	122.4	148.8	135.9	166.4
Low blockage				
High retaliation	103.2	162.6	136.7	173.3
Low retaliation	123.8	190.7	160.2	194.7

Table 2. Mean Scores for Target Power

Treatment	Low damage		High damage	
	Low probability	High probability	Low probability	High probability
High blockage				
High retaliation	187.1	187.1	178.4	171.9
Low retaliation	182.3	168.6	163.6	176.9
Low blockage				
High retaliation	179.8	173.6	163.8	165.1
Low retaliation	149.4	159.6	137.6	146.0

Figure 1. Representation of patterns of control by adversary and target.

Representation of Patterns of Control

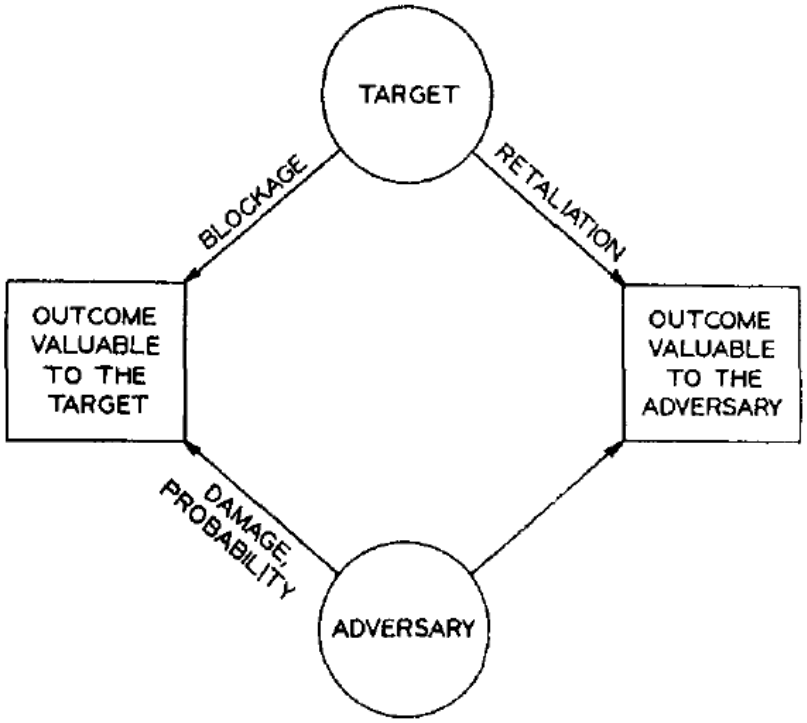

Figure 2. Predictions regarding adversary's power and target's power from the pattern of control.

Predictions from Patterns of Control

PATTERNS OF CONTROL	INDEXED IN PRESENT STUDY BY:	PREDICTIONS	
		TARGET'S POWER	ADVERSARY'S POWER
(1) TARGET'S CONTROL OVER OUTCOME VALUED BY TARGET	BLOCKAGE	INCREASE (+)	DECREASE (−)
(2) TARGET'S CONTROL OVER OUTCOME VALUED BY ADVERSARY	RETALIATION	INCREASE (+)	DECREASE (−)
(3) ADVERSARY'S CONTROL OVER OUTCOME VALUED BY TARGET	DAMAGE, PROBABILITY	DECREASE (−)	INCREASE (+)
(4) ADVERSARY'S CONTROL OVER OUTCOME VALUED BY ADVERSARY	(NONE)	DECREASE (−)	INCREASE (+)