Dynamics of Communicator and Audience Power: The Persuasiveness of Competence versus Warmth

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Abstract: The current research offers a new theoretical perspective on the relationship between power and persuasion. This work introduces the hypothesis that power affects the messages shared by communicators and the messages recipients are responsive to. Specifically, compared to low-power and neutral states, high-power states produce a greater emphasis on competence information. As a consequence, high-power communicators generate messages with greater competence information and high-power audiences view competence messages as more diagnostic. In contrast, low-power states produce a greater emphasis on warmth information. As a result, low-power communicators generate messages with greater warmth information and low-power audiences view warmth messages as more diagnostic. Together, a power matching-effect occurs between communicator and audience power: high-power communicators are more effective in persuading high-power audience members, whereas low-power communicators are more effective in persuading low-power audience members. Four experiments find support for these effects and the underlying process in oral and written contexts with three distinct manipulations of power. Together, these experiments demonstrate that the success of persuasive communications is affected by the incidental alignment between the psychological sense of power of the communicator and the audience.