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SITUATIONAL STRUCTURE AND INDIVIDUAL SELF-ESTEEM AS DETERMINANTS
OF THREAT-ORIENTED REACTIONS TO POWER

by

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To be presented at the meetings of the
American Psychological Association
Cleveland, Ohio
September, 1953

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This was an experiment designed to specify some of the conditions under which power exercised over an individual becomes a threat to that individual. The two conditions explored were those of individual level of self-esteem and structuredness of the stimulus situation. Although there are presumably many conditions under which power may become more or less of a threat, these conditions were seen as relevant largely because they were suggested by a more extensive field investigation and because they help to indicate the nature of some of the relations between social structure and personality.

The theoretical model used in the experiment attempted to relate power to threat and interposed the two relevant conditions of self-esteem and structure between the relationship of power and threat. The theory assumes that power may lead to threat, but that the actual threat present is dependent upon self-esteem and structure. Depending upon the degree to which these two factors were present it was assumed that the individual would be more or less able to cope with a situation in which he is strongly motivated to reach a goal. Little structure affords few guidelines and cues for his behavior, and low self-esteem is associated with a less sure grasp of the work and a greater anticipation of failure and punishment. Due to both of these factors he is less able to act in his own behalf in the face of power exercised over him, and since such action is necessary for need satisfaction, he experiences more threat. Threat it was assumed, is distinct from challenge or deprivation and involves the individual's feelings that he has little control over the world or over his own fate. Thus, when the power-laden situation provides no support and when he

¹This paper is based on a doctoral dissertation submitted to the Social Psychology Program, University of Michigan, 1953.

has low self-esteem, he is more likely to see it as threatening, since the exercise of power, by definition, involves control over the individual's goal attainment.

From this model we were able to derive our major hypothesis:

Hypothesis: The degree of threat experienced by the individual in a situation where power is being exercised over him and in which he is ego-involved, is a function of the interrelationship between his level of self-esteem and the degree of structuredness of the situation; the lower the self-esteem and the less the structure, the more the threat.

Both structure and self-esteem were seen to be continua which had high as well as low extremes. They were also presumed to operate by themselves in determining the degree of threat experienced by the individual in the specified situation. Therefore, two corollary hypotheses dealing with the effects of structure alone and self-esteem alone were also specified. Within any degree of structure, low self-esteem was expected to bring more threat than high, and within any level of self-esteem lack of structure was supposed to lead to more threat than structure.

A laboratory experiment was conducted to test these hypotheses. One hundred and ninety-eight telephone operators were used as subjects. They were all designated low power persons. Since a trained assistant was used as the power figure in all conditions, this made 198 experimental groups, each group composed of the trained assistant (power figure) and the subject. The superior assigned the subject a task and whether or not the subjects succeeded or failed in the assigned task was up to the superior.

The subject's motivation to succeed at the task was kept uniformly high as was the power of the superior over the subject's goal attainment. Self-esteem and structure were systematically varied.

Self-esteem was measured by a modified Q-sort. The discrepancy between the subjects self-ideal and his self-percept was taken as the index of self-esteem. The subjects rated themselves within these two sets on a series of statements drawn from Murray's Explorations in Personality. These statements were grouped around relevant needs and specified interpersonal interactions and ways of handling social reality. The population was divided into (a) High, (b) Medium, and (c) Low groups, which were then assigned equally to different structure conditions. Degrees of structure were created by varying the degree of clarity of the subject's task and the degree of consistency of the power figure's behavior. Word-symbol matching exercises constituted the task. A clear set and an unclear set were evolved and pre-tested and shown to be clear or unclear in terms of the degree of consensus as to which words matched which pictures reached by the pre-test sample. For each set we provided consistent and inconsistent directions to be given by the power figure (the trained assistant). Four degrees of structure resulted: (a) consistency-clarity, (b) consistency-unclearity, (c) inconsistency-clarity, and (d) inconsistency-unclearity.

Threat was measured by responses on a number of variables assumed to be concomitants and effects of threat. These were attraction to the interpersonal situation, security in it, anxiety, perception of the power figure, self-perceptions, resultant motivation to do well on the task, gene-

ralized aggression, and amount of time spent on the task. These data, except for the last, were all gathered by means of a post-experimental questionnaire. These questions themselves were direct where it was feasible to ask direct questions and somewhat projective where direct responses were impossible.

The major hypothesis was completely confirmed. When structure and self-esteem operate together, they are significant determinants of the extent to which power is perceived as a threat. Those individuals who were high in self-esteem and were presented with a highly structured situation showed less threat-oriented behavior than did individuals who were low in self-esteem and were confronted with an unstructured stimulus situation. In all cases, the differences were in the predicted direction and in all but a few the differences between the two groups were highly significant. Thus, the low self-esteem, little structure people, as a result of their experiences in the experimental situation indicated the threat they were expected to experience by being less attracted to the interpersonal situation, to the power figure, and to the task than were the high self-esteem, structure people. They were also less secure, showed more anxiety, perceived the power figure more negatively, felt that they had made a bad impression, and perceived themselves more negatively. They were less motivated to do well towards the end of the session, they turned up as having more generalized aggression, and finally, they spent more time on the experimental task.

The two corollary hypotheses which specified the effects of structure alone and the effects of self-esteem alone were less well supported. When each of the main factors operates alone, its effect is not as strong or pervasive as when both factors operate together in complimentary fashion, either to lend support to the individual or to deny him support. However, the hypothesis concerning the effects of structure alone appeared to provide confirmation for the theory described. There was strong evidence that the effects of structure when it operates alone are also highly predictable: within each level of self-esteem little structure appeared to bring more threat than high structure. This was a good deal more true, though, for the high self-esteem people than for the low self-esteem people. Lack of structure appeared to "touch off" the reaction of the highs to the experimental situation, while the lows, who are more threat-oriented to begin with, are not affected as much by additional threat which takes the form of few situational supports.

The effects of self-esteem alone were least predictable. In testing this hypothesis we went into the nature of the different self-esteem groups in detail and went deeply into the differences between them in terms of their responses on the dependent items. In so doing, we were able to shed more light on the hypothesis about the effects of structure alone, and see if, in fact, the low self-esteem people did begin with greater threat-orientation in the conditions of high structure. We saw that they did; and also that it was not the mere presence of more or less threat that mattered when there was little structure, but the way threat was reacted to and handled.

In other words, the original hypothesis about the effects of self-esteem was expected to hold true within any degree of structure on the theory that people of low self-esteem are in general more threatened than people of high self-esteem. This was expected to be so no matter what the situation because of their characteristic ways of handling the world. But it was found to be true only in highly structured situations where the threat is that which the individual brings into the situation with him. This is consistent with the original assumptions. However, in unstructured situations the high self-esteem people become just as threatened as the lows. The difference between these two types of people, then, is not that one becomes more or less threatened than the other when the environment becomes overly challenging. The difference resides in the way each responds to threat, in the mechanisms by which they attempt to handle threat. Highs tend to repudiate and depersonalize the situation to save face, whereas lows are more dependent upon the situation and more vulnerable to imposition from external events. The highs deny the value of the task, withdraw their motivation and ego-involvement, are less attracted to the situation, feel the power figure could have improved the way she conducted it, but yet spend more time on the task. They do not say that the task is difficult or that one should avoid such tasks, or that one worries about them. The highs appear to be concerned with keeping up a good front under threat. The lows on the other hand, are more dependent upon the power figure and more concerned with the power figure's behavior. They find it more difficult to reject the situation, are more willing to say the task is difficult, that one worries about such things and avoids them if possible. Their

major concern then, is with the way they are treated by the power figure.

These findings necessitate a slight modification of the theoretical position taken originally. We may no longer say flatly that people of high self-esteem find an overly challenging situation less threatening than people whose self-esteem level is rather low. The highs handle threat by maintaining their selves intact, the lows are more vulnerable to outside influence. This is quite in line with the reasons we may advance for why the highs are high and the lows are low. The measure used to classify people as high or low self-esteem took the discrepancy between self-ideal and self-percept attributions as the index of self-esteem. Those individuals with large discrepancies between their self-ideal and self-percept were classified as low, and those with small discrepancies were classified as high. High people do not so readily admit inconsistencies in their self-picture, whereas lows become lows because they are more willing to see and publicly admit these inconsistencies.

We were then led to some further speculation about the nature of the differences between what we have generally called high self-esteem people and those called low self-esteem people. In order to confirm and anchor the interpretation we advanced, an analysis was made using another small sample of the relationship between personality measures derived from the Blacky test and the self-esteem index. Except for the few truly high self-esteem people characterized by absence of conflict, most of our highs seemed characterized by a need for structure and dependence upon situational supports. These data were entirely consistent with the position we took in regard to the threat-oriented behavior of the subjects in the experimental situation and made us feel more certain of its meaningfulness.

We may then say, that in the process of testing the hypothesis that power may lead to threat (depending upon the level of self-esteem of the individual over whom power is being exercised and the structure of the situation within which it operates), we have more stable differences between different personality types. The high self-esteem people seem to be characterized by reaction formation and rigidity in their reactions to threat inherent in power; and the lows appear to be those who are more dependent upon the power-laden situation and show a greater need for structure. It would seem that the facade the highs show on the self-esteem measure is related to their repudiation of the power-laden situation and the willingness of the lows to admit internal discrepancies is related to their situational vulnerability. Future research may well concern itself with the relationship between modes of reacting to threatening situations and modes of self-rating when these ratings are seen as very important and the individual is defensively ego-involved. This would reveal more about the nature of most of the people we have termed high self-esteem and would also serve to delineate the articulation points between interpersonal relations in experimental situations and general ways of presenting ones self to the world in order to maintain and enhance the self. By this sort of procedure we would be helping to fill in some of the links between social structure and personality.