

# Researchers explore how power influences interpretation

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A newly completed New York University study of public reaction to the 9/11 attacks concludes that people in positions of power, from government officials to managers working on Wall Street to military personnel, tended to interpret the events in more abstract terms and with more certainty and positivity than ordinary individuals.

The study, "Power Differences in the Construal of a Crisis," slated for publication in [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#), is a rare, comprehensive test of the relationship between power and perception in a real-world context, illuminating how decision makers' understanding of the attacks were affected by power and such factors as geographic proximity. Its authors include Joe C. Magee, assistant professor of management, Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University; Francis J. Milliken, professor and Peter Drucker faculty fellow, the NYU Stern School of Business; and Adam R. Lurie, a student at New York University.

The analysis of hundreds of public comments published or aired in the media from September 11 to 20, 2001, supports other investigators' prior findings that abstract interpretations are a factor responsible for the tendency to be overconfident in estimating how long it will take to complete one's objectives. The researchers also note that abstract construal might have contributed to national leaders underestimating the difficulties they would face in accomplishing their objectives stemming from September 11, 2001.

"Given that America's strategic decision makers also had power domestically, geopolitically, and militarily, and [that] power would [make them more abstract in their thinking], it seems likely that they would have overestimated their chances of achieving their goals," they write. "As it turns out, in the aftermath of 9/11, the government began an escalation of military aggression that it is still seeking to resolve at the time of this writing."

"Our study opens up the question of whether or not this was due in part to the construal processes of government and military officials, influenced by the hypothetical nature of the situations they were considering and the power they held," they add.

Source: New York University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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