

Psychology researcher finds that power does go to our heads

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Power -- defined as the ability to influence others -- makes people think differently. For North Americans, a feeling of power leads to thinking in a focused and analytical way, which may be beneficial when pursuing personal goals.

"What's most interesting about this study is the idea that thinking is flexible, not rigid or innately pre-programmed. We are able to attune our style of thinking to the needs of the situation," explains Li-Jun Ji, the study's co-author and a [social psychologist](#) who studies the relationships between culture and thinking. "However, the specific ways we might attune our thinking seems to depend on our cultural background."

For most people, being in a position of power or influence means that you want to influence others and achieve your own goals. In North America, these goals tend to be self-defined and independent from the wider [social context](#). As a result, thinking -- focusing on one's own goal and how to achieve it without being distracted by the surrounding context -- can be advantageous.

Dr. Ji also found that North American individuals with high [socioeconomic status](#) (SES) displayed more analytical thinking than low SES individuals. She believes that this may be because higher SES increases people's feelings of agency, a [precursor](#) to power.

In order to induce feelings of power, the researchers asked [study participants](#) to recollect occasions in their lives when they had influenced

others. The kind of memories the participants recalled included making a shy roommate more outgoing, influencing people to buy products as part of a fundraiser, and leading a struggling soccer team to victory.

The participants were then asked to complete a number of different tasks designed to assess whether they were thinking more analytically or more holistically. Analytical thinking is characterized by processing a focal object and its features independently from its surrounding context (for example, using adjectives to describe a ball as 'red' or 'round'). Holistic thinking involves a focus on contextual information and the relationships between objects (for example, using verbs like 'kick' or 'play' to highlight the connection between the ball and its environment).

More information: This research was published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

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