

Powerful people are quick to notice injustice when they are victimized, research finds

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Powerful people respond quickly to unfair treatment when they are the victims, but they are less likely to notice injustice when they benefit or when others are victimized, according to new research published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

In four experiments, [participants](#) who were primed to think of powerful situations perceived [unfair treatment](#) more quickly when it affected them and were more likely to take action to avoid disadvantageous situations than powerless people. The study findings didn't differ for men or women. Most of the participants were white so the results weren't analyzed based on race.

In one online experiment with 227 participants, the high-power group wrote about a time when they had power over someone else while the low-power group wrote about an experience when someone had power over them. Each participant then played a computer game where their reaction times were measured in deciding the fairness of the distribution of coins between the participant and two computer-generated players. The high-power group responded more quickly than the low-power group when they were the victims of unfairness but not when they benefitted from an unfair distribution of the imaginary wealth.

In a similar experiment, 265 participants observed the money-distribution game rather than being active players, and they watched as one computer-generated player repeatedly received fewer coins than the other players. The high-power group was significantly slower than a

control group in perceiving unfair situations that affected others. In another experiment, the high-power group also was slower to perceive unfair situations when they directly benefited from them.

"Powerful people are only faster to notice unfair situations when they're the victims," Sawaoka said. "Our findings also suggest that [powerful people](#) are slower to notice unfair situations that victimize other people, and this converges with other research demonstrating that the powerful are less empathetic to the plight of others."

In a final experiment, 100 participants played a game where they were either beneficiaries or victims of an unfair distribution of wages by an employer. When participants were treated unfairly, the high-power group switched more quickly to another employer, while the low-power group stayed with the same employer longer even though they had received lower wages.

Since the writing exercise designed to make participants feel powerful or powerless only had temporary effects, the differences between powerful and powerless people are probably greater in the real world, where powerless people often are overwhelmed by injustices on a daily basis, Sawaoka said.

The study findings help explain the persistence of income inequality and "white privilege" in American society, said lead researcher Takuya Sawaoka, a doctoral student in psychology at Stanford University.

"Since whites tend to occupy powerful or advantaged positions in society, this fosters a sense of entitlement, and powerful people come to believe that they deserve better outcomes than others," he said. "Thus, whites may be very quick to notice and respond to perceived injustices, but this entitlement also could make them less likely to notice injustices that victimize minorities."

"People who are repeatedly victimized by unfairness are going to end up with fewer resources and opportunities," he said. "Effectively responding to unfair situations (e.g., by seeking out more equitable outcomes) could enable the powerful to maintain their higher social standing. In contrast, because powerless people are slower to perceive and respond to unfairness, they may become more vulnerable to exploitation. These processes could end up perpetuating gaps between the powerful and powerless."

More information: Sawaoka, T.; Hughes, B.; and Ambady, N. (2015). Power Heightens Sensitivity to Unfairness Against the Self. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41 (7).

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