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Understanding the Connection of Position-Based Power to Social Status across Seventy Cultures

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Understanding the Connection of Position-Based Power to Social Status across Seventy Cultures

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Abstract

Even among the most egalitarian societies, hierarchies of power and status shape social life. However, power and received status are not synonymous—individuals in positions of power may or may not be accorded the respect corresponding to their role. This study employs data from 18,096 participants across seventy cultures to investigate when position-based power is associated with elevated social status.

We document that the positive link between position-based power and elevated social status characterizes most cultural regions, with the exception of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) and Post-Soviet regions, where we found no effect on average. Additionally, the strength of the association between perceived power and social status varies significantly based on individual and cultural factors. Firstly, the perception of powerholders as benevolent contributors to their communities amplifies the positive link between position-based power and social status. Conversely, the perception of powerholders as self-interested weakens this relationship. Secondly, among cultures that endorse harmony in social interactions (Self-Expression vs. Harmony), social order and traditions (Embeddedness), and maintaining strong norms (Cultural Tightness), the association between position-based power and social status is particularly strong.

Our results underline the importance of using power to benefit others and thus build and legitimize a just social order. Ultimately, as hierarchies persist in the modern world, it is crucial to demand and foster benevolent behaviors from powerholders to benefit whole societies.

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Do you respect your current boss? Did you respect the previous one? What determines whether people holding power over us are respected or not? Human societies are typically organized within hierarchical structures. Even among the most egalitarian cultures, such as Scandinavian societies, some individuals occupy higher positions in the hierarchy and wield more power than those lower in the hierarchy, consequently exerting a stronger impact on society. However, does such position-based power also command respect?

The link of position-based power to social status is intriguing from a psychological perspective: while the power of powerholders is exercised on subordinates, social status is inherently subjective and voluntarily granted (Blader & Chen, 2014; Van Vugt et al., 2008). Psychology has examined the relationship between power and status almost exclusively within WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic; Heinrich, 2020) and Confucian contexts. As a result, this relationship remains largely understudied in the remaining majority of world cultures. Here, we address this gap. We hypothesize that the overlap of power and status varies based on certain conditions at both an individual level and a culture level (see Figure 1). At the individual level, we examine how powerholders' perceived utilization of power, whether for their own benefit or for the benefit of their community, shapes the respect they receive. At the culture level, we examine four contextual moderators signifying cultural tendencies to preserve status quo or free expression in various domains of social life: Power Distance (Hofstede, 2001), Self-Expression vs. Harmony (Vignoles et al., 2016), Embeddedness (Schwartz, 2009), and Cultural Tightness (Gelfand et al., 2011). By exploring how position-based power links to status across cultures, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of hierarchy and

may ultimately aid academics and practitioners in integrating knowledge on the consequences

of power in a culturally sensitive way (Krys et al., 2023).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study
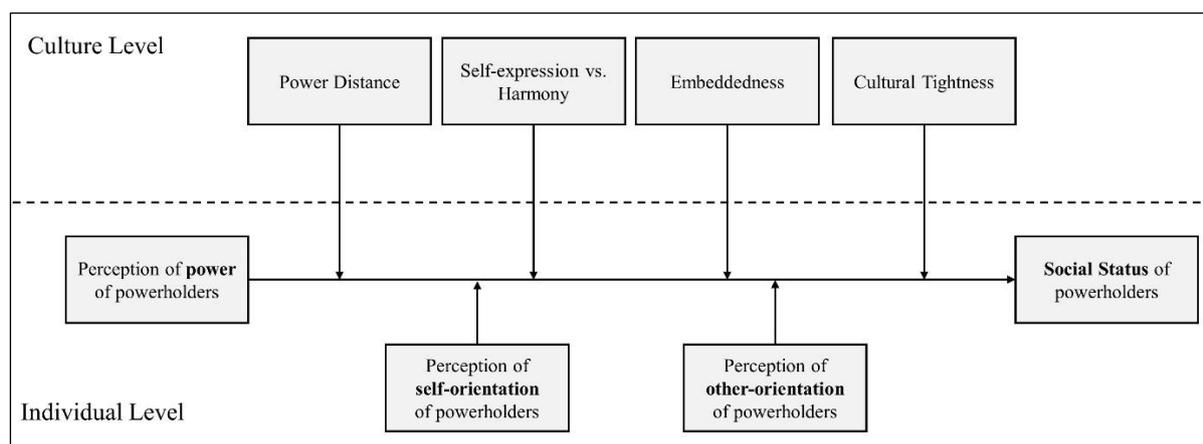
Power and Status

Our central aim is to examine the link between position-based power and social status.

We define power as the ability to control resources and outcomes for other people (Magee &

Galinsky, 2008), and status as the prominence and respect received by a person (Anderson et

al., 2001; Blader & Chen, 2014). The relation between power and status is particularly

intriguing because, unlike power, which can be wielded unilaterally, social status is inherently

subjective and always lies in the eyes of beholders (Blader & Chen, 2014; Van Vugt et al.,

2008). Consequently, while somewhat related, hierarchies of power and status do not always

overlap (Blader & Chen, 2014). For example, while an unpopular manager may still possess

the authority to dismiss subordinates easily, an esteemed professor may wield less direct

power over their students despite their high social status. These differences likely influence

the behaviours of people lower in the hierarchy, leading them to vary their actions depending

on whether they are dealing with powerful or respected individuals (Fousiani & van Prooijen, 2022).

Previous research has demonstrated the consequences of the mismatch between power and status. Power without status has various negative outcomes, including interpersonal conflict (Anicich et al., 2016), fostering of demeaning demands upon others by powerholders (Fast et al., 2012), unethical decision-making (Liu et al., 2019), corruption (Gu et al., 2020), and increased power struggles, opposition, and anxious concerns among subordinates (Wang et al., 2021). However, much of this research has been conducted using data from a single cultural context, overlooking the significant role of culture in shaping individual, interpersonal, and collective processes surrounding position-based power and social status (see Gobel & Miyamoto, 2023). For example, To et al. (2015) demonstrated that the connection between perceiving someone as powerful and high in status is greater among individuals who endorse horizontal-collectivism and vertical-collectivism cultural orientations (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Li et al. (2017) provided another example, showing that the incongruence between power and status threatens the position of powerholders in hierarchical cultures, but not in egalitarian ones. Given that most psychological research has been limited to WEIRD and Confucian samples (Krys et al., 2024), our aim here is to broaden the understanding of how position-based power predicts the conferment of social status across a diverse range of cultures.

Self- and Other-Oriented Use of Position-Based Power May Shape Its Relation to Social Status

We hypothesized that the understanding of how position-based power is linked to social status depends on the perceived use of power by those who possess it. Powerholders may be perceived to utilize their influence and control for personal gain or for the benefit of the group they oversee. Such self- and other-oriented usage of power is likely relevant for the

attained social status. Functional theories of status conferral (see Berger et al., 1974) indicate that being perceived as able to contribute to the group's overall success and proper functioning is the main source of a powerholder's social status.

The perceived usefulness of high-status individuals for the group has two components: competence (Ridgeway, 1987) and benevolence, that is an inclination to benefit the collective good (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Previous research has highlighted the importance of altruism, generosity, cooperativeness, helpfulness, ethicality, and morality in attaining social status (Cheng et al., 2010; DesJardins et al., 2015; Spark et al., 2018). These other-oriented dispositions can become entangled with status in a positive feedback loop, as individuals high in social status may increase their generosity towards the group after achieving higher positions (Willer, 2009), and may be motivated to engage in further prosocial behaviours to maintain their status (Kafashan et al., 2014). Anthropological evidence supports the idea that the cultural evolution of status was important for group cooperation through other means than coerciveness (Henrich et al., 2015). In general, it seems that position-based power is likely to strongly translate into social status, if that power is exercised for the benefit of others. However, a notable limitation of the research discussed so far is the predominant focus on Western or Confucian societies, which raises concerns about the generalizability of these findings to other cultural regions.

Broad cultural confirmations that the other-orientation of powerholders builds status are scarce. Buss et al. (2020) compared fourteen cultures in terms of behaviours perceived as status-enhancing. Sacrificing for others, sharing resources, and social connectedness were universally positively associated with social status. On the other hand, Torelli et al. (2014) discovered the difference in the effect of perceived warmth on social status based on collectivistic social orientation. Although warmth and other-orientation are not synonymous, these findings raise the question of whether other-orientation is more important for social

status in certain cultural contexts (see Gobel & Miyamoto, 2023). Existing research does suggest that other-orientation interacts with cultural factors to influence outcomes. For example, a cross-cultural study of 116 countries found that in societies perceived by their inhabitants to be unfair, self-orientation (vs. other-orientation) was positively associated with life satisfaction. Conversely, in societies with low levels of perceived social injustice, self-orientation was negatively associated with life satisfaction (Joshanloo & Soltani, 2023). Thus, the extent to which other-oriented use of power is a key factor in status attainment remains an open question, and our study aims to bridge this cultural gap by examining this relationship across a large number of societies.

Can self-orientation also serve as the basis of social status, or does it always undermine it? Although self- and other-orientations are not necessarily in opposition (see Miyamoto et al., 2018), from a group perspective, the perceived prioritization of one's own goals and interests may be perceived as contradictory to generosity and cooperativeness. Thus, when power is perceived to be exercised in a self-oriented way, it may undermine a powerholder's social status. However, if the self-orientation of a certain powerholder leads to their success in exercising power, social status may be attained through the perception of their competence. Buss et al. (2020) showed that among the cultures studied, aspects such as having a well-paid job, holding an executive position, or being accepted at a prestigious university were associated with higher social status. Torelli et al. (2014) showed that individuals with a high (vs. low) individualistic social orientation assigned higher status based on a person's perceived competence. Given the current scarcity of direct empirical evidence, it is imperative to examine the potential moderating effect of perceived self-orientation on the relationship between position-based power and social status.

Understanding the Role of Cultural Context

Cultures vary in terms of the hierarchical structures they have adopted, thereby influencing the conferral of status to powerholders. In this study, we started by examining the effects of two cultural characteristics: Power Distance (Hofstede, 2001) and the distinction between cultures emphasizing Self-Expressive versus Harmonious models of selfhood (Vignoles et al., 2016). However, as our findings regarding these dimensions were only partially conclusive, we conducted additional exploratory analyses using two other cultural characteristics: the values of Embeddedness (Schwartz, 2009) and Cultural Tightness (Gelfand et al., 2011). Therefore, in the present study, we present results on four cultural characteristics as potential moderators of the relationship between power and social status. Below, we provide the rationale for investigating these cultural characteristics.

Power Distance

Power Distance represents a fundamental cultural difference in desired (in)equalities in social life (Hofstede, 2001). Cultures high in Power Distance are more accepting of disparities in power. Cultures low in Power Distance endorse egalitarian relations and are less accepting of differential treatment of individuals based on their position within the social hierarchy. Some empirical evidence suggests the relevance of this dimension for the relationship between position-based power and social status. For example, in hierarchical cultures, top managers are more likely to be dismissed when their power is incongruent with their status, whereas this effect is not present in egalitarian societies (Li et al., 2017). This finding suggests that power and status are more closely linked in hierarchical cultures, while they are more independent in egalitarian cultures.

Self-Expressive vs Harmonious Models of Selfhood

The second important, yet understudied, contextual factor is the cultural emphasis on Self-Expression or Harmony (see Vignoles et al., 2016). In cultures that prioritize self-

expression, individuals tend to communicate openly and express their opinions freely, irrespective of the potential for conflict. In such environments, the positive effect of power on social status may be less guaranteed. First, the legitimization of one's power is unlikely to be supported by the status quo, given the reduced cultural pressure to maintain it. Second, power itself may be perceived as unwanted dominance, the infringement on others' capacity for self-expression, ultimately decreasing the social status accorded to powerholders. Redhead et al. (2019) demonstrated that in the United States, imposing power through dominant behaviours is ineffective in sustaining high status over the long term, as dominant individuals are likely to lose their position. Based on the available indirect evidence, we hypothesize that in self-expressive cultures, the relationship between power and status may be weaker and more dependent on other situational factors.

Conversely, members of harmonious cultures tend to avoid disagreements to preserve social relationships and maintain balance within the group. Powerholders in such cultures have a responsibility to uphold harmony, often through administering punishment in cases of subordinate transgression. Ito et al. (2024) found that the dominating leaders increase social assurance (i.e., the belief that engaging in selfish behaviours will not be tolerated) in Japan (a harmonious culture) but decrease social assurance in the United States (a self-expressive culture). In China, perceived power is positively related to perceived warmth (Li et al., 2022), which reflects the dominating yet caring nature of paternalistic leadership popular in Confucian Asia (Cheng et al., 2014). Although the cultures mentioned above differ in many aspects beyond Self-Expression vs. Harmony, this initial evidence suggests the potential usefulness of dominating power in contexts that prioritize harmony, and as such, powerful individuals may enjoy higher status compared to their counterparts from self-expressive cultures. In other words, despite the current lack of multicultural investigation, there are initial

reasons to suspect that in harmonious cultures, the positive overlap between power and social status is stronger than in self-expressive ones.

In addition to the two cultural domains discussed above and initially designated as our primary variables, we subsequently included two additional cultural variables in the data analysis. These two variables were not measured in our study, and we acquired them from external sources. The justification for incorporating these two additional variables is outlined below.

Embeddedness

The third cultural characteristic of interest is the emphasis on Embeddedness (Schwartz, 2009), which describes viewing people as parts of a broader social framework rather than autonomous entities. Within cultures that endorse Embeddedness, the affiliation with the collective holds considerable significance, alongside striving toward shared goals, the preservation of the established order, social harmony, and adherence to traditional practices. Additionally, people in embedded cultures value security, obedience, and wisdom. Such characteristics likely constitute a foundation for higher respect granted to more powerful individuals, who may not need to rely solely on personal qualities for the legitimization of their power. Status may be granted in conjunction with a high position, since it is supported by the prevailing norms, obedience, and in certain contexts, adherence to tradition. In such a cultural environment, the social status one holds may be less likely threatened by concerns that those lower in the hierarchy would withdraw respect from the powerholder, thereby violating the cherished social order within a group. Conversely, powerholders from cultures that do not foster Embeddedness would be deprived of such a foundation of status. Although powerful, they may need to rely on different strategies to maintain respect and prominence, making the relationship between power and social status weaker and less guaranteed.

Cultural Tightness

The last cultural dimension that may explain the overlap between hierarchies of power and status is Cultural Tightness, which describes the strength of norms, and low tolerance of deviant behaviours (Gelfand et al., 2011). In tight cultures, people are supposed to abide by social norms, and there is strong moral outrage directed towards rule violators. For such cultures, power may come with an elevated social status, especially when supported by a formal role within institutions or organizations, as the social status of powerholders can be magnified by rules and regulations mandating appropriate behaviour for people lower in the hierarchy. Additionally, members of tight cultures expect strong, capable leadership (Aktas et al., 2015), therefore persons with a high capacity for influence and control may be granted greater respect.

On the other hand, loose cultures exhibit weak norms and higher tolerance for deviant behaviour. We suspect that in such cultural environments, the power of an individual is somewhat independent of their social status. Respect conferred to powerholders may depend less on formal titles and positions. People lower in the hierarchy may evaluate powerholders in line with their own personal values and opinions, and rely less on social convention. Therefore, while power can still relate to social status, we expect that relation to be weaker among loose cultures.

The Present Study

This study examines the individual and cultural factors that predict the attribution of social status to powerholders. To answer such questions in a comprehensive way, we introduce the explanations from both individual and cultural-level. Firstly, we investigate whether being perceived as powerful—having the ability to control resources and outcomes for others based on one's position—is associated with elevated social status, that is, being respected. Given that the nature of this association may depend on how powerholders are

perceived to employ their control and influence—whether towards self-oriented goals or for the benefit of others—this paper considers self-orientation and other-orientation of powerholders to be individual-level moderators of the power-status relationship.

Secondly, we hypothesize that the processes of conferring status upon powerholders differ across cultures. Therefore, this paper also examines four different cultural dimensions - Power Distance (Hofstede, 2001), Self-Expressive vs Harmonious models of selfhood (Vignoles et al., 2016), Embeddedness (Schwartz, 2009), and Cultural Tightness (Gelfand et al., 2011) - as culture-level moderators of the power-status association. While research into power and status is not scarce, it has been largely limited to WEIRD and Confucian cultural circles. Here, we aim to broaden the horizons of our understanding of these phenomena by analysing how power and status overlap across seventy cultures that span all major cultural regions.

Method

The current study is part of a broader cross-cultural investigation that aims to explore the cultural factors associated with the endorsement of societal development goals, well-being, and perceptions of powerholders. Within the scope of the present paper, our focus centers on examining perceived power, social status, and self- and other-orientation of powerholders, as well as cultural dimensions of Power Distance, Self-Expression vs. Harmony, Embeddedness, and Cultural Tightness.

Participants and Countries

The data for this study were collected from a diverse range of 70 cultures. The required minimal sample in each culture was set at $n=200$, but in several cultures, a smaller sample was collected, which were included in the analyses. After excluding participants who had more than 1 (out of 12) failed attention checks, and those who had any missing data for

the variables of interest, the final sample size for analysis was *n*=18,096. Further details

regarding the breakdown of the samples can be found in Table 1.

The data were collected between late 2022 and early 2024. The last author has

prepared all study materials, which were then applied by all other authors in their respective

cultures. A template version of the questionnaire in English was prepared in Qualtrics and

Google Forms for online administration, and in a separate document for paper-pencil

administration. Collaborators across cultures were then instructed to translate the

questionnaire using the back-translation method. Next, they administered the questionnaire to

samples of their convenience. This included 66 online samples, 7 paper-pencil samples, and 4

mixed samples. In some cultures, more than one sample was collected, specifically three in

Algeria and two in respectively Australia, Russia, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the

United States of America. In such cases, the samples were combined within a culture.

Individual-Level Measures

Perception of power. We used a scale developed specifically for this study. The scale

aimed to measure the extent to which powerholders from various domains of social life (e.g.,

managers, teachers, judges, professors, policemen, etc.) were perceived to have control over

people's everyday lives. In the study, we defined power as an outcome control (Thibaut &

Kelley, 1959; Depret & Fiske, 1993) and influence (Dahl, 1957). Participants were provided

with the following instruction: "*We would like to understand the role of people who are*

higher in the hierarchy in almost every society, e.g., managers, judges, professors, policemen

or teachers. According to your own experience, to what extent do the following statements

describe your society?". The scale consisted of three items: 1. "In [culture name], people

higher in hierarchy have more power than an average person", 2. "In [culture name], people

higher in hierarchy have firm control over citizens' lives", 3. "In [culture name], people higher

in hierarchy have a strong influence on citizens' lives". Participants were asked to rate each

item on a five-point Likert-type scale, with the following response options: 0 (*doesn't describe my society at all*), 1 (*describes my society a little*), 2 (*describes my society moderately*), 3 (*describes my society well*), 4 (*describes my society exactly*). The outcome variable was computed as the mean score of the three items, representing participants' overall perception of power in their society. The internal reliability for the whole sample was acceptable (Cronbach's α = .68). Reliabilities for all cultures separately are presented in Table S2 in the Supplementary Online Material.

Social status. We created a scale specifically for this study. The scale aimed to assess social status based on components of general admiration (Fiske, 2010), trustworthiness, and competence (Chen, 2012). The instruction provided to the participants was the same as in the perception of power scale. The scale consisted of the following items: 1. "In [culture name], citizens admire those higher in hierarchy", 2. "In [culture name], people higher in hierarchy do their job well", 3. "In [culture name], each citizen can rely on people higher in hierarchy". Participants were instructed to assess each item using the same 5-point Likert-type scale employed for the perception of power scale. The mean score of the three items was computed to indicate the overall social status attributed to powerholders in the respective culture. A higher mean score indicated a higher perceived social status of powerholders. The internal reliability for the whole sample was low (Cronbach's α = .54). However, due to the conceptual breadth of the scale, and a limited number of items due to the plausibility for cross-cultural administration, we propose this to be sufficient to advance the further analyses.

Perceived self-/other-orientation. We used the shortened version of the scale developed by Wasiel et al. (2024). The scale consisted of three items for both self- and other-orientation. The instruction and response scales provided to participants were the same as in the previous two scales. The items for self-orientation were: 1. "In [culture name], people higher in hierarchy use power to increase their wealth", 2. "In [culture name], people higher

in hierarchy are concerned primarily with their own interests", 3. "In [culture name], people higher in hierarchy use power to increase their own privileges". The items for other-orientation were: 1. "In [culture name], people higher in hierarchy act in the interest of citizens", 2. "In [culture name], people higher in hierarchy take responsibility for well-being of citizens", 3. "In [culture name], people higher in hierarchy take responsibility for the good of their communities". The mean score of the items was computed to indicate the overall perceived self-orientation and other-orientation of powerholders in the respective culture. A higher mean score for self-orientation indicated a perception of powerholders as being focused on their own interests, while a higher mean score for other-orientation indicated a perception of powerholders as acting in the best interest of citizens and their communities. The internal reliability for the whole sample was good for perceived self-orientation (Cronbach's α = .87) and for perceived other-orientation (Cronbach's α = .83).

Individual level control variables. In the study, we also considered several individual-level control variables. These variables include age, gender, and subjective social status, which were measured using the McArthur Ladder (Adler et al., 2000).

Invariance of the Individual-level Measures Across Cultural Regions

To examine whether the individual-level scales we used were invariant across the studied cultures, we conducted a series of multigroup confirmatory factor analyses (Van de Schoot et al., 2012). Given the rarity of finding invariance across a large number of groups, we compared 7 cultural regions rather than 70 countries (Welzel et al., 2023). We established metric invariance for these cultural regions, which justifies testing the associations between the measures. Detailed information about invariance testing is available in the Supplementary Online Material.

Cultural-Level Indexes Measured in the Study

  Power Distance. We used four items to assess the prevalence of social hierarchy in each society. Two of the items were introduced first in our study: 1. "In [culture name], people higher in hierarchy must be addressed using formal titles", 2. "In [culture name], people higher in hierarchy can be addressed by their first (i.e., given) name" (reversed). Another two items were adapted from (Kim & Zhang, 2014) to ensure consistency: 3. "In [culture name], citizens think that social hierarchy is important", 4. "In [culture name] citizens think that social equality is important" (reversed). The instruction and response format were the same as in the previous scales. The mean score of the four items was computed to obtain the power distance score, representing the perceived level of social hierarchy in each society. According to the original concept (see Hofstede, 2001), Power Distance is considered a characteristic of societies rather than of individuals. Therefore, this study followed this theoretical framework and aggregated the Power Distance scores at the culture level rather than analysing them at the individual level.

  Self-Expression vs. Harmony cultural model of selfhood. We used the Culture and Identity Research Network Self-Construal Scale Version 3 (CIRN-SCS-3, Krys et al., 2020; Uskul et al., 2023; Yang, 2018) to capture the self-expression vs. harmony dimension to provide insights into individuals' tendencies toward expressing themselves or prioritizing harmonious relationships. For this study, four items were selected from CIRN-SCS-3, with two representing the self-expression pole and two representing the harmony pole. Participants were instructed as follows: "*We would like to ask some questions about you. To what extent the below statements describe you?*". Participants then responded to each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with response options ranging from 0 (*doesn't describe me at all*), to 4 (*describes me exactly*). An example of an item is, "*You prefer to express your thoughts and feelings openly, even if it may sometimes cause conflict*".

The Self-Expression vs. Harmony dimension can be employed as both an individual-level and societal-level measure. In this study, the focus was on using it as a measure of societal-level context. By examining individuals' responses and aggregating them at the societal level, the study aimed to understand the prevalence of self-expression or harmony orientations within a given society.

Cultural-Level Indexes Measured in Other Studies

Embeddedness scores were retrieved from Schwartz (2008). The score is based on the average values of schoolteachers among 80 cultures, specifically: respect for tradition, social order, forgiving, obedience, politeness, being clean, national security, being devout, reciprocation of favours, being moderate, self-discipline, honouring elders, protecting one's public image, and wisdom. Embeddedness values have been established using the multidimensional scaling method (see Schwartz, 2009).

Cultural Tightness was taken from Gelfand et al. (2011). The scores are available for 33 cultures. The index is based on questions regarding the strength of the norms and tolerance (or lack thereof) of deviant behaviour. The example item is: "*People in this country have a great deal of freedom in deciding how they want to behave in most situations*".

Table 1

Demographic Information and Descriptive Statistics for the Cultural Dimensions

Culture	Language of the Questionnaire	N	Age (*SD*)	% female	% student	Cultural Tightness	Embeddedness	Self-Expression vs. Harmony	Power Distance
Algeria	Arabic	981	35.55 (12.61)	52,40%	46,38%	-	-	2.12	2,07
Angola	Portuguese	83	24.62 (6.95)	56,63%	100,00%	-	-	2,02	2,58
Australia	English	631	52.21 (19.34)	50,53%	12,85%	4.40	3.59	1,74	1,60
Austria	German	250	27.13 (8.87)	74,49%	93,83%	6.80	3.11	1,80	2,51
Azerbaijan	Azerbaijani	173	25.44 (9.96)	17,52%	72,99%	-	-	2,34	2,22
Bangladesh	English	96	27.76 (6.43)	59,38%	80,21%	-	-	1,75	2,28
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bosnian/Croatian/ Serbian	356	30.80 (12.70)	76,12%	67,70%	-	4.01	2,09	2,25
Brazil	Portuguese	96	30.36 (9.66)	54,88%	93,90%	3.50	3.62	1,92	2,28
Bulgaria	Bulgarian	204	33.27 (10.75)	49,02%	100,00%	-	3.87	2,15	2,31
Burkina Faso	French	28	23.64 (1.99)	21,43%	96,43%	-	-	1,63	2,29
Canada	English	276	21.62 (3.35)	77,41%	100,00%	-	3.31	1,80	1,98
Chile	Spanish	170	29.15 (9.88)	70,63%	95,80%	-	3.64	2,29	2,41
China	Chinese	235	26.51 (6.77)	49,79%	60,00%	7.90	3.74	1,90	2,00
Colombia	Spanish	252	29.30 (11.00)	48,41%	58,73%	-	3.86	2,04	2,17
Croatia	Croatian	203	36.05 (13.68)	84,73%	44,33%	-	4.00	2,13	2,32
Czechia	Czech	285	34.51 (13.97)	76,80%	52,51%	-	3.59	2,11	2,49

Denmark	Danish	86	26.02 (3.77)	60,78%	92,16%	-	3.19	1,88	0,87
Ecuador	Spanish	246	28.22 (9.00)	46,67%	46,19%	-	-	1,97	2,31
Egypt	Arabic	70	28.04 (7.74)	36,76%	45,59%	-	4.45	1,89	2,44
Estonia	Estonian	238	37.33 (13.72)	72,65%	69,96%	2.60	3.81	1,97	2,14
France	French	164	36.38 (14.50)	79,27%	74,39%	6.30	3.20	2,21	2,52
Georgia	Georgian	170	35.06 (15.17)	75,88%	48,82%	-	4.12	2,06	2,32
Germany	German	305	29.06 (10.26)	59,34%	82,78%	7.00	3.10	1,89	2,25
Ghana	English	179	24.70 (3.51)	56,42%	92,86%	-	4.27	1,61	2,61
Hong Kong	English	136	22.36 (3.20)	67,67%	96,99%	6.30	3.76	1,71	1,98
Hungary	Hungarian	529	24.19 (6.56)	72,97%	98,11%	2.90	3.60	2,06	2,48
Iceland	Icelandic	372	29.41 (9.04)	69,43%	98,12%	6.40	-	1,83	0,89
India	English	87	23.83 (3.66)	70,11%	94,25%	11.00	3.97	1,96	2,47
Indonesia	Bahasa Indonesia	236	20.58 (2.75)	77,13%	98,65%	-	4.27	1,53	2,35
Ireland	English	262	25.54 (7.60)	60,69%	98,47%	-	3.41	1,78	1,82
Italy	Italian	136	33.07 (12.86)	57,35%	55,88%	6.80	3.46	2,29	2,54
Japan	Japanese	133	21.72 (1.27)	73,64%	100,00%	8.60	3.49	1,73	2,08
Jordan	Arabic	242	34.33 (12.02)	65,15%	40,50%	-	4.20	2,05	2,26
Kazakhstan	Russian	205	28.16 (11.64)	71,71%	68,29%	-	-	2,08	2,31
Kenya	English	177	28.75 (6.19)	43,50%	30,51%	-	-	2,04	2,25
South Korea	Korean	201	22.44 (2.12)	59,70%	100,00%	10.00	3.68	1,58	2,47
Luxembourg	German	162	39.04 (19.58)	70,92%	50,35%	-	-	1,99	2,22
Madagascar	French	244	29.30 (7.59)	50,00%	35,92%	-	-	1,89	2,51

Malaysia	English	1903	29.13 (6.62)	69,75%	31,78%	11.80	4.35	1,60	2,50
Malta	English	66	42.11 (15.16)	69,70%	22,73%	-	-	2,09	2,31
Mexico	Spanish	154	34.17 (15.14)	74,19%	50,40%	7.20	3.90	2,22	2,41
Morocco	Arabic	150	29.35 (7.90)	36,00%	30,67%	-	-	1,91	2,23
Nigeria	English	279	24.48 (8.00)	66,40%	75,10%	-	4.41	1,74	2,75
North Macedonia	Macedonian	97	32.51 (12.55)	69,07%	50,52%	-	3.91	1,89	2,35
Norway	Norwegian	79	38.27 (15.34)	61,02%	50,85%	9.50	3.45	1,86	1,00
Pakistan	English	50	30.78 (8.38)	56,00%	50,00%	12.30	4.31	1,88	2,29
Palestine	Arabic	187	40.52 (11.54)	61,29%	31,88%	-	4.09	1,96	2,32
Peru	Spanish	195	30.68 (13.98)	55,97%	54,09%	-	3.92	2,13	2,21
Philippines	English, Filipino	238	26.31 (8.26)	59,72%	74,54%	-	4.03	1,82	2,74
Poland	Polish	227	28.81 (7.94)	49,34%	43,61%	6.00	3.86	2,05	2,44
Portugal	Portuguese	176	36.89 (15.85)	73,30%	46,02%	7.80	3.43	1,92	2,37
Romania	Romanian	225	26.22 (8.85)	62,67%	79,56%	-	3.78	2,03	2,54
Russia	Russian	414	23.20 (3.63)	60,39%	98,07%	-	3.81	2,12	2,20
Saudi Arabia	Arabic	131	26.15 (9.50)	64,12%	70,23%	-	-	1,75	2,36
Senegal	French	176	24.62 (4.82)	37,50%	99,43%	-	4.45	2,00	2,39
Serbia	Serbian	193	24.11 (3.49)	69,43%	100,00%	-	3.57	2,15	2,59
Slovakia	Slovak	272	39.43 (13.08)	85,29%	50,74%	-	3.82	2,20	2,49
South Africa	English	475	31.70 (11.12)	49,68%	41,19%	-	4.03	1,93	2,11
Spain	Spanish	261	25.63 (7.23)	68,85%	86,54%	5.40	3.31	2,11	2,10
Suriname	Dutch	140	31.42 (11.54)	51,43%	39,29%	-	-	1,93	2,17

Taiwan	Chinese	204	27.36 (6.78)	74,02%	55,39%	-	3.82	1,53	2,11
Trinidad and Tobago	English	179	28.34 (9.46)	70,86%	99,34%	-	-	1,98	2,31
Turkey	Turkish	1278	31.02 (11.85)	57,36%	48,36%	9.20	3.77	2,24	2,67
Uganda	English	123	29.13 (5.75)	52,94%	41,18%	-	4.23	1,84	2,21
Ukraine	Ukrainian	167	31.23 (11.99)	73,65%	73,05%	1.60	3.93	2,45	2,39
United Arab Emirates	English	97	21.96 (6.39)	82,47%	94,85%	-	-	1,80	2,21
United Kingdom	English	193	29.38 (12.35)	73,02%	69,84%	6.90	3.34	1,71	1,86
United States of America	English	363	30.92 (12.03)	66,18%	64,16%	5.10	3.67	1,96	2,19
Venezuela	Spanish	307	37.10 (12.04)	48,00%	26,55%	3.70	3.74	2,00	2,19
Vietnam	Vietnamese	198	24.92 (6.70)	62,12%	59,09%	-	-	2,02	1,67

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

We computed zero-order correlations between the variables of interest at their respective levels (individual and cultural). Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations. At the individual level, for the whole sample, social status showed a positive correlation with the perception of power and perceived other-orientation of powerholders and a negative correlation with perceived self-orientation of powerholders. Perception of power was positively correlated with perceived self-orientation, and weakly negatively correlated with perceived other-orientation. Perceived self-orientation and other-orientation were negatively linked. At the culture level, Power Distance showed a positive correlation with Embeddedness. Self-Expression vs. Harmony cultural model of selfhood was negatively correlated with Cultural Tightness.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations (*SD*), and Correlations of the Studied Variables

Variable	Mean	*SD*	1	2	3
Individual level					
1. Social Status	1.75	.79	-		
2. Perceived Power	2.66	.82	.13***	-	
3. Perceived Self-orientation	2.94	.98	-.24***	.48***	-
4. Perceived Other-orientation	1.53	.90	.58***	-.09***	-.46***
Culture level					
1. Power Distance	2.21	.37	-		
2. Self-Expression vs. Harmony	1.94	.20	.19	-	
3. Embeddedness	3.78	.35	.40**	-.10	-
4. Cultural Tightness	6.66	2.84	.03	-.41*	.29

*Note:* *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Perceived Power and Social Status Across Cultures

The main goal of the study was to examine the connection between being perceived as powerful and being accorded an elevated social status, and what are the conditions that

strengthen or weaken that relationship. As a preliminary analysis, we examined the regional variability of the effect of perceived power on social status, for which we found substantial cultural differences. Although the relation between perceived power and social status was positive on average for the whole sample, we did not find such an effect in the WEIRD and Post-Soviet cultural regions. We found the strongest effect in Confucian Asia, *Estimate*=.28, *SE*=.057, *p*<.001, and a similar one in Latin America/Caribbean cultural region, *Estimate*=.23, *SE*=.040, *p*<.001 as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa, *Estimate*=.22, *SE*=.042, *p*<.001. We found a smaller effect in Non-Confucian Asia/Oceania, *Estimate*=.16, *SE*=.046, *p*=.002, and Middle-East and North Africa (MENA), *Estimate*=.13, *SE*=.040, *p*=.002. In the Post-Soviet cultural region the effect was non-significant, *Estimate*=.05, *SE*=.042, *p*=.278, the same as in WEIRD cultures, *Estimate*=.03, *SE*=.025, *p*=.238. The slopes for each culture, as well as the average slopes within all major cultural regions are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The link between Perceived Power and Social Status Across Cultures and Cultural Regions.
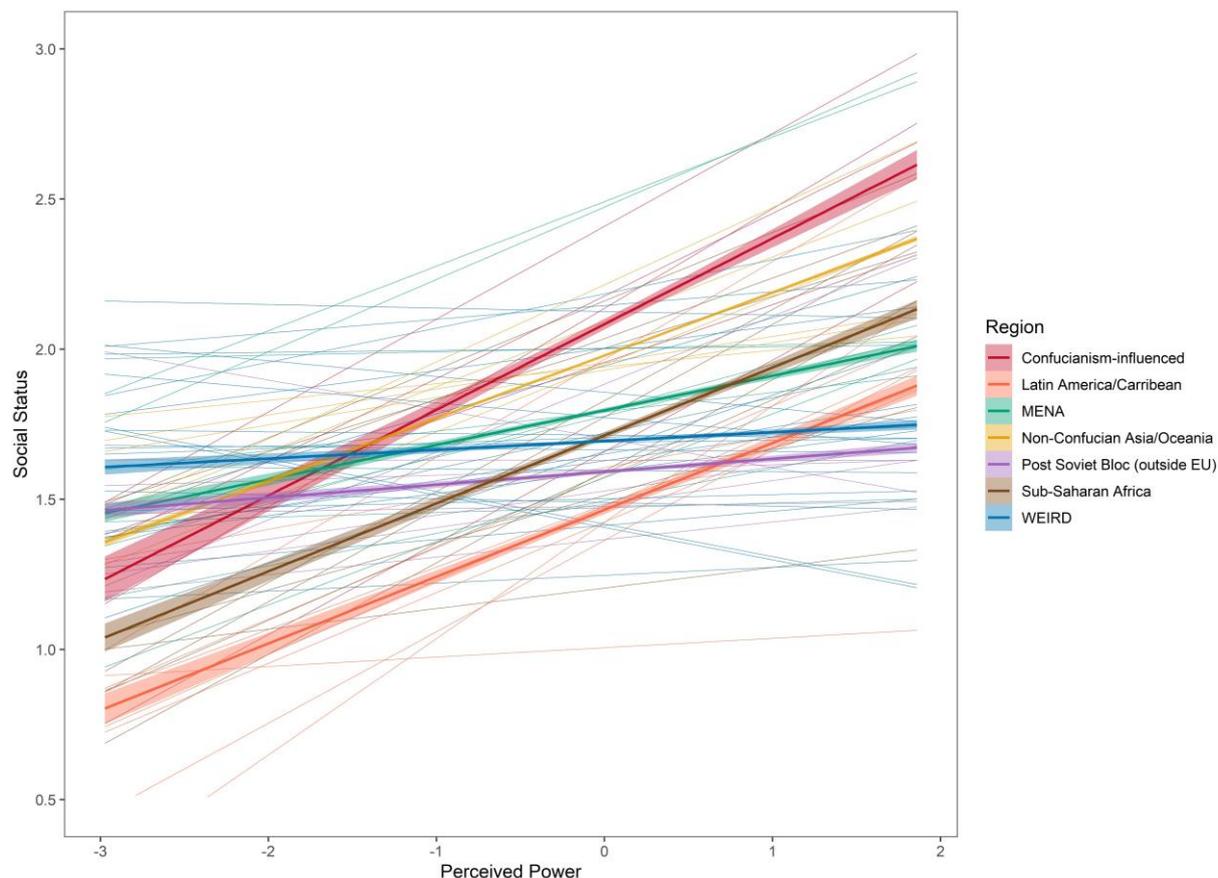
Note. The plot represents the simple slopes for cultures and cultural regions of the effect of perceived power on social status based on multilevel model with random intercept and random slopes.

To test the individual and cultural moderators of the relationship between perceived power and social status, we employed a Multilevel Modelling (MLM) approach, following the stepwise model-building procedure proposed by Aguinis et al. (2013). The individual-level predictors were centered clusterwise to properly estimate the within-group effect. The culture-level predictors were grand-mean centered. In the first step, we computed a null model (Step 1) to estimate the variance explained by culture (intra-class correlation, ICC). The results indicated that culture accounted for 14.8% of the variance of social status conferred to powerholders. Given the non-trivial level of ICC, the application of multilevel modelling

(MLM) is warranted to account for the hierarchical structure of the data and address the interdependence of observations within cultures (Hox et al., 2017). Next, in Step 2, we included fixed effects at both the individual and culture levels. In Step 3, we allowed the slopes to vary between cultures for power, as well as self- and other-orientation of powerholders. In Step 4, we introduced the individual-level interaction between the perceived power and perceived self- and other-orientation. Finally, in Step 5, we included the cross-level interaction between perceived power, and our initial set of two cultural-level moderators: Power Distance and Self-Expressive vs Harmonious Culture. The parameter estimates of the models are presented in Table 3. The results with individual-level control variables of age, gender, and subjective SES are presented in Tables S5-S7 in the Supplementary Online Material. Social status of powerholders was positively predicted by respondents' age and negatively predicted by their subjective SES and other gender (that is, non-male, non-female). The main results remained largely the same after the inclusion of these three control variables.

The results of the analysis revealed several findings. Higher perceived power was positively connected to an elevated social status in all of the models we tested. We also observed a negative main effect of the perceived self-orientation of powerholders on their social status, which means that powerholders perceived as being motivated by personal gain tend to be conferred lower social status. Conversely, we found a main positive effect of other-orientation on status; those who perceive powerholders to be primarily concerned about others' welfare grant them higher status. We also found significant interactions between perceived power and perceived self/other-orientations. Perceived power was related to social status weaker, when powerholders were perceived as highly self-oriented. On the other hand, perceived power and social status were linked stronger when powerholders were perceived as other-oriented. For the Johnson-Neyman plot please see Figure 3.

Beyond the individual-level effects, at the culture level, there was a significant negative effect of Self-Expression vs. Harmony on the social status of powerholders, suggesting that in cultures that prioritize self-expressive behaviours, individuals tend to assign lower social status to powerholders compared to cultures that prioritize harmony. There was also a significant cross-level interaction between perceived power and Self-Expression vs. Harmony on the social status of powerholders, which means that in cultures which foster self-expressive behaviour and openness, the link between perceived power and social status is weaker than in cultures that foster preserving harmony The Johnson-Neyman plot is depicted in Figure 4. Contrary to our expectations, in models 3, 4, and 5 we found a significant negative main effect of Power Distance on social status of powerholders. There was no significant cross-level interaction between perceived power and Power Distance.

Table 3

MLM Predicting Social Status of Powerholders with Power Distance And Self-Expression as cultural moderators

	Null Model (Step 1)		Random intercept and fixed slope (Step 2)		Random intercept and random slope (Step 3)		Level 1 interaction (Step 4)		Cross-level interaction (Step 5)	
Fixed effects	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Individual-level										
Intercept	1.74***	0.038	1.74***	0.033	1.74***	0.033	1.75***	0.033	1.75***	0.033
Perceived Power (PP)			0.20***	0.007	0.19***	0.012	0.19***	0.012	0.20***	0.012
Self-orientation (SO)			-0.07***	0.006	-0.07***	0.012	-0.08***	0.012	-0.08***	0.012
Other-orientation (OO)			0.46***	0.006	0.45***	0.010	0.44***	0.010	0.44***	0.010
Culture-level										
Power Distance (PD)			-0.13	0.010	-0.18*	0.089	-0.18*	0.088	-0.18*	0.089
Self-Expression vs. Harmony (SEH)			-0.70***	0.174	-0.68***	0.161	-0.66***	0.160	-0.67***	0.160
Level-1 interaction										
PP x SO							-0.03***	0.006	-0.03***	0.006
PP x OO							0.02***	0.006	0.02***	0.006
Cross-level interaction										
PP x PD									0.03	0.033
PP x SEH									-0.14**	0.059
Random effects										
Within-culture variance	0.55		0.37		0.36		0.36		0.36	
Intercept variance	0.10		0.08		0.075		0.075		0.075	
Slope variance (Perceived Power)					0.006		0.006		0.006	
Slope variance (Self-orientation)					0.007		0.006		0.006	
Slope variance (Other-orientation)					0.004		0.004		0.004	
Log Likelihood	-20347		-16733		-16597		-16566		-16563	

Note. ***$p<.001$, **$p<.01$, *$p<.05$. Estimator = Restricted Maximum Likelihood. Culture-level predictors are grand-mean centered. Individual-level predictors of interest are centered clusterwise.

Figure 3

Johnson-Neyman Plot for the Effect of Perceived Power on Social Status on Different Levels
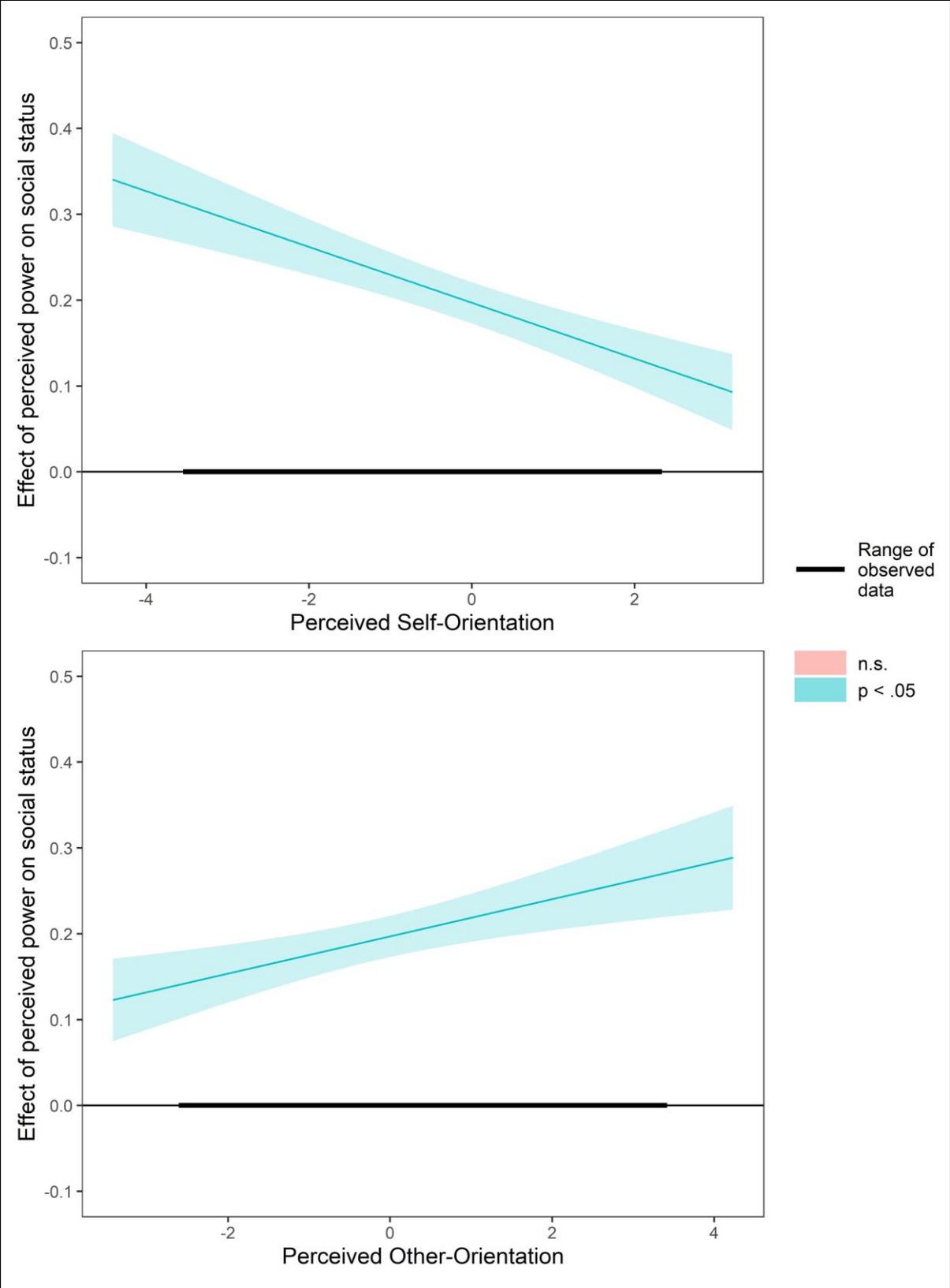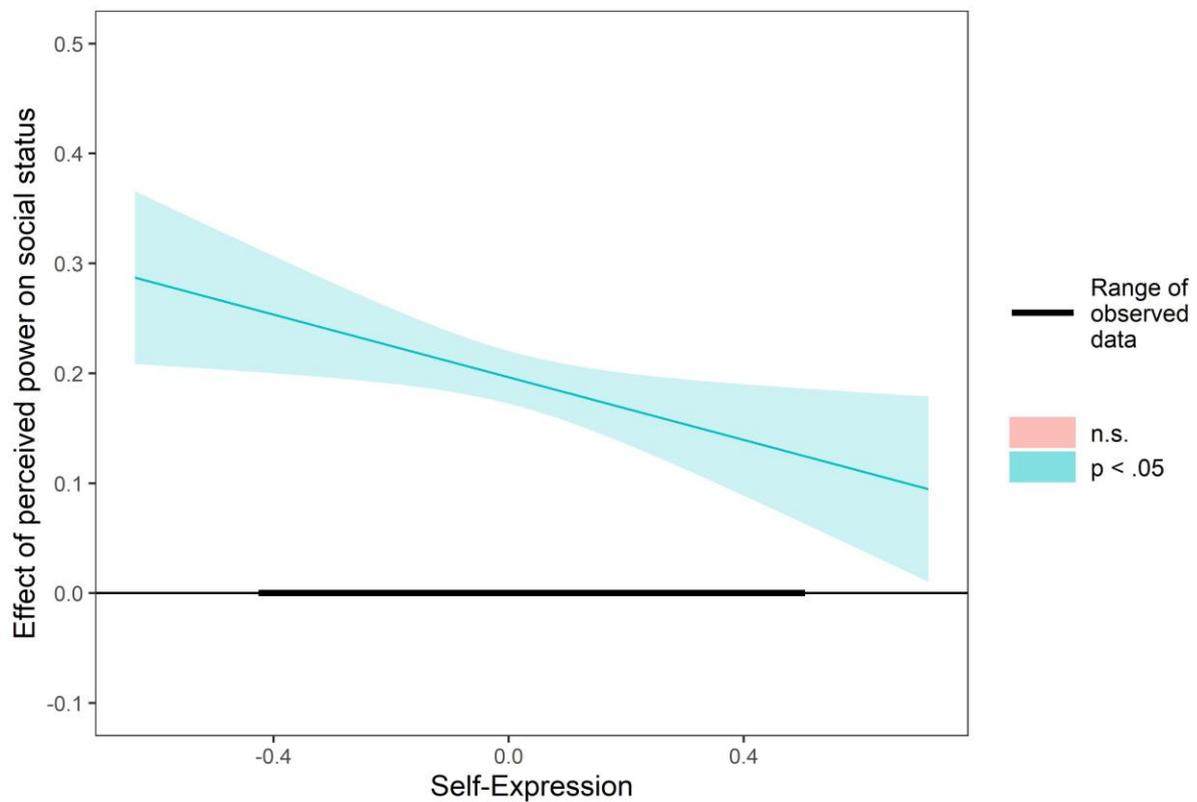of Perceived Self/Other-Orientation of Powerholders.

Figure 4

Johnson-Neyman Plot for the Effect of Perceived Power on Social Status on Different Levels
of Self-Expression vs. Harmony on the Culture Level.

Power and Status: Additional Cultural Moderators

As a supplementary analysis, we explored two other cultural moderators important for
understanding the status attribution to powerholders: Embeddedness and Cultural Tightness.
For each, we obtained the culture-level data from external sources, and therefore, not all
cultures sampled in our study had those indexes available. The lack of a national score for a
certain culture led to its exclusion from the analysis. To minimize the information loss, we
therefore computed separate models for Embeddedness and Cultural Tightness.

The effect of Embeddedness is based on the data of n=14 398 participants from 52
cultures. We computed a model including perceived power and self/other-orientations, level-1

interactions, Embeddedness and its interaction with perceived power. Embeddedness had no main effect on the conferral of social status upon powerholders, *Estimate=-.06*, *SE=.105*, *p=.571*. However, it significantly moderated the relation between the perceived power of powerholders, and their social status, *Estimate=.08*, *SE=.038*, *p=.036*. For the full model breakdown, see Table S3 in the Supplementary Online Material. The effects of perceived power on social status depending on culture's Embeddedness are presented in the upper part of Figure 5. In cultures scoring high on Embeddedness, the relation between the perceived magnitude of power and social status was stronger than in cultures that do not foster Embeddedness.

In the case of Cultural Tightness, the scores were available for 26 cultures sampled in our study. Therefore, the model is based on data from *n=8 671* participants. Similar to Embeddedness, Cultural Tightness exhibited no significant main effect on the social status of powerholders, *Estimate=.03*, *SE=.017*, *p=.116*. At the same time, it significantly moderated the effect of perceived power on social status, *Estimate=.02*, *SE=.006*, *p=.015*. Full model is presented in Table S4 in the Supplementary Online Material. For the visualization of the effects of perceived power on social status on different levels of Cultural Tightness, please see the bottom part of Figure 5. Members of tight cultures associate power with a higher social status than members of loose cultures.

Figure 5

Johnson-Neyman Plot for the Effect of Perceived Power on Social Status on Different Levels

of Embeddedness and Cultural Tightness on the Culture Level.
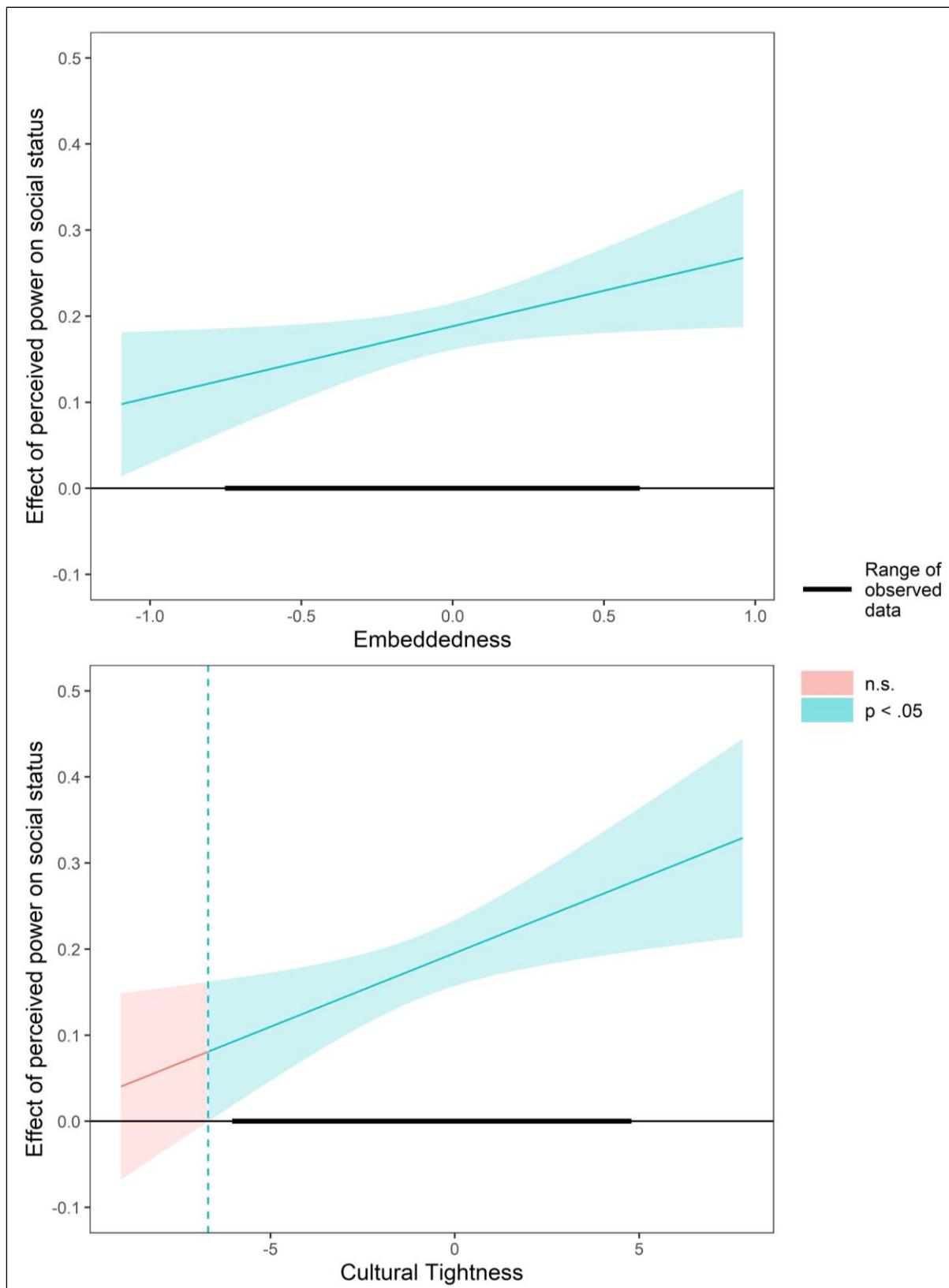
Discussion

Research on the relationship between hierarchies of power and status has lacked a comprehensive cross-cultural investigation. These topics are essential to study because powerholders, by virtue of their positions, significantly shape formal institutions, private companies, and informal groups, either leading them towards flourishing or contributing to their deterioration (Maskor et al., 2022). Social status plays a vital role in indicating the positive outcomes arising from the exercise of power. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the conditions and processes that influence the relationship between position-based power and status. Our study builds on and verifies previous research while also advancing current knowledge in the field.

In this study, we examined the perceptions of powerholders from various domains of social life, such as managers, professors, teachers, policemen, and officials. We measured the extent to which those individuals were perceived as powerful. We also assessed the general social status attributed to powerholders, considering aspects such as admiration, the perception of their competence, and dependability. Finally, we investigated how participants viewed the use of power, specifically in terms of whether powerholders are perceived to prioritize their own well-being, wealth and prestige (self-orientation), or if they use their power for the benefit of their citizens and local communities (other-orientation).

To capture the cultural context, we measured cultural values and practices related to the acceptance of social hierarchy (Power Distance), the endorsement of authenticity, despite potential conflict, or the preference for harmony and suppressing personal feelings (Self-Expression vs. Harmony). Finally, we investigated external moderators, such as the endorsement of traditional values, maintaining status quo and social order (Embeddedness), as well as the strength of social norms and the intolerance for deviant behaviours (Cultural

Tightness). Studying these phenomena allows us to address our core research questions and establish a foundation for future studies on social hierarchy.

Is Being Perceived as Powerful Universally Connected to an Elevated Social Status?

While power and status are considered two separate models of social hierarchy (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), our study reveals that in practice, such orthogonality is characteristic mostly to WEIRD and Post Soviet cultures, where we found no connection between perceived power and social status on average. The underlying reasons are most likely diverse. For example, members of WEIRD cultures show relatively high nonconformity (Henrich, 2020), which may manifest as resistance to power, ignoring authority figures, and an eagerness to withdraw respect when the conduct of powerholders is perceived as not up to the individual standards. On the other hand, in some Post Soviet cultures, the historical legacy of centralized control and authoritarian governance turned oligarchy may shape the perception of powerholders as corrupt and, therefore unworthy of respect (Sandholtz & Taagepera, 2005). Beyond those two cultural regions, we observed a general, albeit variable, positive connection between hierarchies of power and status. However, the *extent* to which powerholders are awarded social status varies, based on individual and cultural characteristics.

First, the level of attributed status depends on the way power is perceived to be exercised. Here, we find support for theories of status conferral (please see Berger et al., 1974). Being perceived as contributing to the group's success by using power to the benefit of others is tied to a higher social status accorded to such powerholders. Perceived unwillingness or inability to contribute to the well-being of those lower in the hierarchy makes the perceived power of powerholders to predict their social status less strongly.

Congruent with this result, the perception of powerholders as self-oriented lowers their social status and weakens the relationship between their power and gained respect. However,

even for highly self-oriented powerholders, perceived power is still a positive predictor of social status.

We also revealed that cultural characteristics matter. In self-expressive cultures, powerholders have a lower status on average. The possible explanation of such an effect lies in the scrutiny that powerholders may face in a culture that encourages self-expression, even with a risk of conflict. People in self-expressive cultures may be more likely to speak up when not satisfied with powerholders' behaviour, undermining their authority, and effectively reducing the social status that comes with power. Additionally, in a culture where unrestricted expression is encouraged, powerful individuals may be perceived as infringing upon individual rights and freedoms, leading to resentment and decreased respect. In contrast, in harmonious cultures, respect towards powerholders may be crucial for maintaining good relationships and avoiding conflict. Furthermore, being a powerholder in a harmonious culture may involve additional responsibilities to ensure social order and reassurance among subordinates (Ito et al., 2024). Engagement with subordinates by regulating their social life may make the position of a powerholder more salient, significant, and respected. At the same time, in harmonious cultures people are socialized to refrain from showing disagreement to preserve the group harmony, making the role of powerholder more stable, and the respect more guaranteed.

Contingent on the culture, powerholders may depend on certain societal foundations to ensure their social status. It seems that cultural characteristics that promote social "rigidity", such as valuing social order and traditions (Embeddedness), as well as the existence of strong norms and regulations (Cultural Tightness), make power more status-conferring. On one hand, in such circumstances, a person in power does not need to rely solely on their own characteristics to legitimize their position; instead, the existing power is supported by the social conventions to which people submit. On the other hand, such a cultural environment

lessens the threat powerholders may face, as people are less likely to voice their dissatisfaction, especially when it disrupts the status quo or the order within a group. Conversely, cultures without strong norms, placing less value on traditions, and encouraging self-expression may present a more challenging environment for status attainment through power. For once, social status is less likely to be "given", as it is not supported by any strong social convention. In such cultures, powerholders may depend on different sources of social status, for example, charisma, reputation from past achievements, or the aforementioned other-oriented use of power. Additionally, people lower in the hierarchy would be more likely to challenge the social status of powerholders when dissatisfied, making it less stable and dependent on situational factors.

Contrary to our expectations, we found that members of high Power Distance cultures tend to confer lower social status to powerholders on average compared to those in low Power Distance cultures. It is important to note that we measured Power Distance in our study using an intersubjective scale (Chiu et al., 2010). In other words, we assessed the degree to which people think their culture is either hierarchical or egalitarian. This does not necessarily mean that people themselves value hierarchy. The perception of a society as hierarchical may therefore be associated with lower social status conferred to powerholders for several reasons: perceived higher corruption or other misuses of power, perceived lack of a merit-based system for electing powerholders, or their perceived detachment from the needs of those lower in the hierarchy. All of these factors can be facilitated by the unequal distribution of power in society. Past research has demonstrated some detrimental correlates of Power Distance, such as higher corruption (Park, 2010) and a greater number of human rights violations (Diener et al., 1995), which constitute abuses of power likely detrimental to the social status of powerholders.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. Firstly, we assessed the general perception of powerholders across various domains of social life. While this broad approach enabled us to draw more general conclusions, it might have conflated some of our results. Different powerholders in specific domains may be perceived differently in terms of their other-orientation. For example, individuals might perceive judges as more other-oriented while viewing managers as more self-oriented. The policemen may be perceived as more powerful than professors. The dynamics of power and status hierarchies are complex and context-dependent, and our study's general approach might mask these nuances. Secondly, our study employed only two cultural moderators measured in the study; the other two were retrieved from external sources with considerable information loss due to missing data. Another limitation of our study is the limited reliability of the perceived power and social status measures. In the case of social status, we conceptualized the construct broadly, which in conjunction with the small number of items most likely produced limited reliability. Furthermore, it is important to note that our study was correlational, which constricts our ability to draw causal conclusions. For example, previous literature suggests a reciprocal relationship between other-orientation and social status (Lyle & Smith, 2014; Kafashan et al., 2014), but our correlational design does not allow us to determine the directionality of this association. To better understand these complex dynamics and establish causal relationships, further in-depth research is necessary.

Conclusion

Hierarchies of power and status are prevalent across human societies, even in those societies that strive for greater egalitarianism. The current study contributes to the understanding of these phenomena by highlighting the link between perceived power and elevated social status across different cultures. However, our findings also indicate that not all

powerholders are equally respected. In order to gain social status, it is important that power is wielded in a way that benefits the local community, and demonstrates a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others. The self-interested use of power, on the other hand, can be detrimental to attaining respect and admiration. Beyond universal processes, our study reveals cultural differences in how powerholders are perceived. People in self-expressive cultures tend to confer less status upon powerholders compared to people in harmonious cultures. Cultural characteristics that promote the status quo make power more strongly connected with social status.

In general, our study emphasizes the importance of promoting other-orientation among individuals in positions of power across various domains of social life. Hierarchies will probably continue to exist in the modern world, so it becomes crucial to incentivize and encourage powerholders to prioritize the well-being of others for the collective benefit of society as a whole. By fostering civic and benevolent behaviour among powerholders, societies can reap the benefits of a more harmonious and equitable social order.

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