



Institute of Psychology
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**Culturally Sensitive Psychology of Social Hierarchy: Self- and
Other-Orientation of Powerholders Across Cultures**

[Kulturowo wrażliwa psychologia hierarchii społecznej: orientacja na siebie i na
innych u osób sprawujących władzę w ujęciu międzykulturowym]

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Doctoral thesis under the supervision of

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Warsaw, 2026

Abstract

Psychological research on power, status, and hierarchy has been developed largely within WEIRD samples, and its conclusions, including the assumption that socioeconomic development tends to reduce the cultural relevance of hierarchy, may not always generalize. The view that progress entails the diminishing of hierarchy does not easily account for trajectories such as the Confucian Asian one, in which steep hierarchies and high developmental outcomes coexist. Social hierarchy, moreover, is rarely a single dimension: power (control over resources and outcomes), social status (respect and prominence), and socioeconomic position (access to resources) are related but not interchangeable, and the extent to which standing on one transfers to the others is itself shaped by culture. At the heart of these hierarchies are institutional powerholders, such as managers, teachers, judges, and officials, through whom hierarchy is most directly enacted in everyday life. This dissertation investigates how authorities are perceived across cultures: whether they are seen as self-oriented (using their position as an opportunity for personal gain) or other-oriented (taking responsibility for those they oversee). The dissertation is based on three first-authored publications.

The first publication tests the relationship between powerholder construals against preferences for societal development in the United States, Poland, and Hong Kong ($n_{\text{participants}}=1,281$). Perceiving powerholders as self-oriented was tied to stronger endorsement of egalitarian aims, such as gender equality, education, human rights, and reduction of poverty, while perceiving them as other-oriented was tied to traditional aims, such as religion, military power, or respect for authority. The results suggest that the responsible exercise of power may help legitimize existing hierarchies and ease pressure for egalitarian change.

The second publication investigates the link between being perceived as powerful and high in social status ($N_{\text{samples}}=77$ from $N_{\text{countries}}=70$ covering $n_{\text{participants}}=18,096$). The link between perceived power and social status was positive on average but absent in WEIRD and Post-Soviet regions, and stronger in Confucian Asia, Latin America/Caribbean, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Other-orientation amplified the link; self-orientation attenuated it. At the cultural level, the relationship was stronger in cultures characterized by Harmony cultural model of selfhood, high Embeddedness, and high Cultural Tightness. The results suggest that the conceptual separation of power and status may be more specific to WEIRD and Post-Soviet regions than universal.

The third publication investigates whether socioeconomic position shapes how powerholders are perceived, with governance quality as a moderator. Across two studies, one

on the 70-culture dataset and one a conceptual replication on an independent dataset of cultures ($N_{\text{samples}}=83$ from $N_{\text{countries}}=62$ covering $n_{\text{participants}} = 17,200$), higher subjective SES was associated with perceiving powerholders as less self-oriented and more other-oriented. However, skepticism toward powerholders was widespread across the socioeconomic spectrum. Corruption Perception Index emerged as the robust moderator. In low-corruption contexts, the negative link between SES and perception of powerholders as self-oriented was the strongest. The results suggest that positive perceptions of powerholders may be both a privilege of socioeconomic position and of living in a well-governed society.

Taken together, the three publications suggest that powerholder perceptions are systematically tied to (1) views about social hierarchy, (2) preferences for societal change, and (3) one's socioeconomic position, and that (4) the strength and shape of these ties depend on cultural context. Hierarchies that appear similar can carry different meanings in different societies, and the figure of the powerholder — a responsible guardian in one society, an opportunist in another — becomes an indicator of cultural and economic foundations of hierarchy in a given society.

Key words: *social hierarchy, culture, powerholders, self-orientation, other-orientation*