

Power in House

Joris Lammers

Tilburg University

Anne Gast

Ghent University

Dr. House: “Sorry. You're in the wrong room. My name on the door, my team, my decisions.”

Dr. Cuddy: “My building, my floor, my people!” – Season 3, Episode 24

The power struggle between Drs. House and Cuddy is one of the most amusing aspects of the series. Cuddy uses many strategies to curtail House and bring him under her control, but however cunning her tricks are, House never fails to take it a step further. For him, no trick is too dirty to maintain or improve his position. This power struggle is not only entertaining; it greatly illustrates social psychological findings on how powerful people behave.

If we think of the powerful, the people that often appear to our minds are Napoleon, Mao, Obama, Donald Trump, or Bill Gates—dictators, presidents, or influential industrialists. But people can obtain power through many ways. They can derive power from their position in a hierarchy. Cuddy for example derives a lot of her power from her position as the Dean of medicine. Because people respect her authority and acknowledge her rightful position, she can ask or even order them to do things. But power can also flow from more individual sources, such as physical strength, charisma, or money. In hospitals one personal source of power trumps all other: knowledge. And there is no one who swims in knowledge like Dr. House – medical knowledge, general knowledge, and a unique ability to combine different pieces of knowledge and evidence into a diagnosis. Think for example about Episode 6, Season 4, in which House is flown to a secret location to diagnose a CIA agent. From a side remark about 40 days of carnival he concludes that the agents lied about where the patient was stationed and therefore mixed up different kinds of nuts:

House: “Whoever knew that John was stationed in Brazil, not in Bolivia.”

Agent Smith: “It’s the same region, the same parasites.”

House: “But not the same language. In Bolivia chestnuts are chestnuts. Brazil, on the other hand, it’s castanhas-do-Pará, literally “chestnuts from Pará”. Because it would be stupid for people from Brazil to call them Brazil nuts!”

Agent Smith: “So he ate Brazil nuts. Big deal.”

House: “No, he ate a lot of Brazil nuts, which is a big deal because they contain selenium.”

Knowledge allows doctors to cure people and save lives. Compare this power to cure and save lives, with the almost trivial power of a president or an industrialist. Sure, presidents can cause or solve economic crises, industrialists can fire or hire thousands of employees, but no one can stop death. Doctors can. Doctors are almost god, apart from small differences:

“God doesn’t limb.” -Episode 2, Season 3

Given his abundant medical knowledge and expertise, within the hospital House must feel like God. In the hospital, House is surrounded by people who depend on his knowledge to stay alive. A dramatic example of this can be found in Episode 19 of Season 5, where a patient suffers from locked in syndrome. The man is conscious and fully aware of his environment but cannot act or react. The doctors naturally assume he is dead and start to prepare to remove his organs for donation. At that moment, House (who due to a motorcycle accident is in the bed next to the patient) realizes that the patient is not brain dead and conscious. He takes up the case and together with his team finds a way to communicate again with the man and finally cure him. This case demonstrates how knowledge can make a doctor powerful, even if he officially is a patient himself.

Medical knowledge also has a less benign face. For example, in one instance in the series, House enters the hospital restaurant and merely suggests that there might be bacteria in the mayonnaise. This has the direct effect that everyone stops eating. If you or I would say that the mayonnaise is not good, people would think we are too picky and they would ignore us. If a doctor says it, people take notice and behave accordingly.

To summarize, House's medical knowledge brings him into an extremely powerful position in the universe of the Princeton Plainsborough Hospital. He can change others' behaviors, he can save their lives. What does this do a person? House's behavior is quite peculiar, to say the least. But could it be that this is due to the fact that he experiences so much power on a daily basis? Some people might believe that House would be as strange as he is if he had not been a doctor but a plumber. We do not. We think that House's bizarre behavior is caused for a great deal by the fact that he has so much power. This is because we know from psychological research that the experience of power can psychologically change a person. People who feel powerful think and act differently than people without power.

Power changes the person

"An anagram for Gregory House? 'Huge ego, sorry'." Season 3, Episode 20

The question whether power can change a person psychologically has been asked for centuries. Plato already believed that a position of power can transform people, mostly for the worse. The 19th century British politician Lord Acton echoed this idea when he claimed that "*power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*". Based on this view, many people have pointed to anecdotes that seem to demonstrate that powerful people, such as Alexander the Great, Nero, or Mao, were indeed corrupted by their power. But these anecdotes do not really prove that power corrupts. First, we might follow our stereotypes about powerful

people and just underestimate how often also people without power can be corrupt. And second, even if we knew that powerful people are more immoral or corrupt than average people, we cannot be sure which came first, the chicken or the egg: Does power make people corrupt or are people with immoral motives particularly interested in power? Or do you perhaps need to be immoral to achieve power?

Psychologists – quite similar to medical scientists – therefore use experiments to answer their questions. In an experiment (whether in medicine or in psychology), one group of people is randomly selected to be treated in one way and another group of people in another way. Think of the episodes in season five in which Foreman runs clinical trials to test a new medication for Huntington's. In these trials, one group of patients is treated with the new medicine and the other is treated with a placebo (which doesn't contain any active ingredient). If after a few months the medicine group has less symptoms than the placebo group, Foreman can conclude that the new medicine is more effective than the placebo. Of course, some patients might have had less symptoms to start with. For exactly this reason it is important that the groups are large and that the patients are assigned randomly to one of them. In this way, scientists hope to balance out these initial differences. When Foreman finds out that his girlfriend Thirteen has been assigned to the placebo group, he secretly put her into the medicine group. This morally motivated act compromises the scientific principle of random assignment and the interpretability of the results. This is why it is unacceptable for the supervisors of the clinical trials.

The same procedure to study the effect of new medicines can also be used to study the effect of power. We can randomly give some people power and others not and then study whether these people differ. If we do this with a sufficient number of people, the effects of pre-existing personality differences are cancelled out against each other. Power can be given to participants in different ways. For example, participants in an experiment can be given the

power to control other participants, to monitor their performance, and to administer payment or punishment. But feelings of power can also be induced in more direct manner; by simply asking people to think about an experience of power.

This procedure, which is called priming, works in a very straightforward manner. If I ask you to think back and remember a time in which you were really happy—for example, when you graduated, when you married, or when you got a great job—this will also affect you in the present. As you think back about the episode, you re-experience the feelings and emotions that you felt at the time. This has the effect that you will start to feel happy again. Of course, this is not limited to happiness. If you think back about a sad event—a funeral, that time when you were fired, or any other loss—you will again feel sad. This can also be done with power. By thinking back about a personal episode of power—irrespective of where it was or what happened—you will also start to feel a bit powerful again.

These experimental methods and priming manipulations might seem artificial and some people would believe that if you want to study the behavior of the powerful you have to observe the behavior of those who are actually powerful. But for the above reasons, experiments with priming manipulations are actually a better tool to study power, because they allow us to establish causality. By observing the actually powerful, we can only conclude that power is associated with certain behavior. By using experiments, we can conclude that power causes behavior. With these experimental methods, researchers have therefore studied the effects that having power and feeling powerful have on people. They have found that Plato and Lord Acton were right; the experience of power does change the person. People who feel powerful behave differently than people who lack power. Interestingly, together these effects read like a very exact person description of House. Let's look at some behaviors that are typical for powerful people and see whether we can find them in House:

Power changes the person: focus on own goals

A first personal characteristic of House is that he is strongly focused on his own goals, whether they are to diagnose an illnesses, to get a huge flat-screen TV, or to find out whether Cuddy wants to have a baby. To get where he wants, House is willing to do anything. He is not afraid to break rules or protocols, offend people, commit felonies, as long as it gets him where he wants.

Cuddy: "You broke into my files."

House: "I had no choice, personnel files are confidential." –Episode 20, Season 5

In this, House is a prime example of how powerful people behave. Powerful people also are very strongly goal oriented. In fact, one could say that powerful people are like tigers. Normal people like us are lambs; we have our eyes at the two sides of our head. Although this does not make it easy to keep our attention on our goals, in front of us, at least we can easily spot danger lurking at the sides. Tigers have their eyes in the front of their heads. They are focused on their goals and ignore the things that happen to their left and right. This allows them to assertively move forward and grab their prey. Powerful people are like that. They know what they want, do anything to get it and brush away each obstacle on their way to reaching their goals. Cuddy describes House's behavior accurately:

Cuddy (to House): "Fifty-one weeks of the year I let you run around like a monkey in a banana factory."

Psychologists have discovered that powerful people are more focused on their own goals by running many studies in which they induced a feeling of power and next studied how this changed people's behavior. In one study, Adam Galinsky and his colleagues seated the

students participating in their research at a desk in an uncomfortably cold room. On the desk was a table-mounted fan that blew even colder air into their face. Despite the discomfort, many students were hesitant to act against the fan. After all, it might have been there for a good reason. Those who were primed with power, however, behaved completely different. Many rotated it so that it no longer blew in their face, others turned the fan off, and some even pulled the plug from the socket, not bothering to even find the switch (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). This is probably exactly what House would have done.

Many similar studies have been conducted since then and they all point to the fact that people who feel powerful are more goal oriented. Powerful people are not distracted by rules or practical problems or important objections. The same goes for House. He just behaves as if normal rules of co-working in the hospital would not apply to him:

Chase: "We've got an MRI scheduled in 20 minutes. Earliest Foreman could get the machine."

House: "I teach you to lie and cheat and steal...and as soon as my back is turned, you wait in line?" - Episode 10, Season 2.

Also other peoples central beliefs or motives count nothing for him. In Episode 14 of Season 4, House wants to compare the reaction of a patient to alcohol with both a drinker and a usually abstinent control drinker. He quickly decides that Jeffrey Cole has to do the control drinking, since he is a Mormon and therefore never drinks. In too many episodes to recall here, House has his team break in the patient's house to search for drugs, bugs or other secrets.

House: "I am extremely disappointed. I send you out for exciting new designer drugs and you come back with tomato sauce." – Episode 8, Season 1

In Episode 7, Season 3, he even persuades the comatose (but temporarily awake) father of a child who suffers from a heart muscle disease to commit suicide to donate his heart and save his son. These are all examples of a powerful person brushing aside concerns and other people's rights to pursue his goal. Powerful people strongly dislike it if they are hindered in their goal pursuit. See this example of House abducting a TV star because he is convinced that he suffers from a dormant but life threatening disorder exactly in the week in which the hospital is being inspected.

House: "You want the star of the hottest daytime drama on TV to die in your hospital?"

Dr. Cuddy: "I want you to cure him without committing any more felonies."

House: "I can't do my job when you're gonna tie my hands like that!"-- Season 4, Episode 14

Power changes the person: risk taking

House: "I take chances all the time. It's one of my worst qualities."

A second striking aspect of House is that he seems to have a strong preference for risks. Normally, people are risk averse. For example, most people prefer a guaranteed 50 Euros over a 50% chance to receive a 100 Euros and a 50% chance to receive nothing. Doctors should also be risk averse. After all, their work involves other people's health and if

their gambles do not work out, people may lose their life. But people who feel powerful are much less sensitive to losses. Again, we see that House's behavior is an accurate description of the powerful. He also likes to take risks, even when a patient's life is at stake.

Cameron: "You can't diagnose that without a biopsy."

House: "Yes, we can, we treat it. If she gets better we know that we're right."

Cameron: "And if we're wrong?"

House: "We learn something else." – Season 1, Episode 1

The fact that a procedure is simply risky is never an argument for House. In Episode 2 of the second season, House decides to temporarily kill and revive a 9 year old girl by removing all her blood, in order to do an autopsy. The fact that Wilson calls this treatment a "lottery shot" only makes it more appealing to House because he thinks it is her *only* shot. But sensing that something is someone's best shot is not how doctors usually decide. They usually follow protocols in difficult cases. Of course, to be fair, if you are treating patients who have so mysterious symptoms as those encountered by House, you cannot always follow protocols. And for many cases that House encounters there exist no protocols. Doctors therefore sometimes need to trust their instincts, abandon protocols, and take an informed risk. But House always follows his instincts and never follows protocols. Why is that the case?

First of all, powerful people are much more certain about themselves. The risks they take therefore appear less risky to them than to others. Second, to use the analogy of tigers again, they are more focused on their goals and less on the negative things that might happen:

Cuddy: "How is it that you always assume you're right?"

House: "I don't, I just find it hard to operate on the opposite assumption. And why are you so afraid of making a mistake?"

Cuddy: "Because I'm a doctor. Because when we make mistakes, people die."

Third, think back to the example of 50-50 chance in the gamble for a hundred Euros. Note that one could say that we are irrational to definitely not want to take the risk in this gamble. But most people wouldn't and that probably has to do with the fact that psychologically 100 Euros are not quite twice as good as 50 Euros. But 100 Euros are 100 Euros. So in some sense it can be rational to be more risk taking and that is probably exactly how House sees it:

‘ House: " Take risks! Sometimes patients die. But not taking risks causes more patients to die, so I guess my biggest problem is I've been cursed with the ability to do the math." – Episode 11, Season 1

Power changes the person: lack of empathy and perspective taking

House: "Humanity is overrated." - Season 1, Episode 1

A third striking aspect of Dr. House is that he seems to lack empathy. Of course, we must realize that some degree of professional distance toward patients is most likely functional for doctors. After all, they are confronted with pain, suffering, and death on a daily basis, and if they would let all this affect them too much, their jobs would become impossible.

House: "If we were to care about every person suffering on this planet, life would shut down." - Episode 12, Season 3

Such professional distance can be found among more people with power. In the best interest of the country, presidents have to make decisions that can lead to a lot of pain and suffering. They therefore find it useful to talk about people in terms of statistics. In battles, generals may need to sacrifice a battalion to save an army. They therefore prefer to speak of military personnel killed or missing as KIAs and MIAs. Using such abstract terms helps them to suppress feelings of empathy that they would normally feel and that would make it harder to make cold, rational decisions. Note that House uses a similarly abstracting way of rationalizing in Episode 4, Season 1, in which he opts for giving two dying babies different treatments in order to find out what caused their sickness and be able to cure other babies.

Foreman: "What the hell are you doing?"

House: "Therapeutic trial to find the cause of the infection."

It almost seems that for House, interacting with patients is a necessary inconvenience when trying to diagnose and treat illnesses. This cynicism is a welcome change from the stereotype that doctors carry the all the suffering of the world on their shoulders. But it is also a nice illustration of how power decreases empathy.

Foreman: "Isn't treating patients why we became doctors?"

House: "No, treating illnesses is why we became doctors." - Season 1, Episode 1

But power does not only decrease empathy, it also reduces perspective taking in a more general way. Many people—even those without power—have difficulty realizing that other people have a different view on matters. For example, people who prefer '80s music

over '60 music believe that most people share their preference for '80s music, but people who prefer '60s music believe that the majority shares their preference for the '60s. But this bias—that people underestimate that others can have a different view on things—is much stronger among those who feel powerful. The powerful often do not bother what others think about their actions. We see this for example, in the episode where House organizes Chase's bachelor party (complete with strippers) in Wilson's home, without asking him for it.

Wilson: "This is my apartment. You can't do this."

House: "Clearly, reality begs to differ" - Season 5, Episode 22

That does not mean that the powerful cannot take perspectives. They are just unmotivated to do so. When the powerful do want to take other people's perspectives, they can often do so much better. House is a master in this. On many episodes he spots small inconsistencies in the patients' stories and find out that they are withholding embarrassing information from him. He is also an expert in guessing other people's thoughts:

Cuddy: "How do you know? You don't have access to the hospital's mainframe."

House: "No, but "partypants" does."

Cuddy: "You stole my password?"

House: "Hardly counts as stealing; it's a pretty obvious choice." – Season2, Episode 1

Power changes the person: freedom of expression

A fourth and final effect of power is that it makes people more free in their expressions. Powerful people do not have to fear condemnation as much as other people. A positive consequence of this is that it can make the experience of power psychologically

liberating. Powerful people can generate more creative ideas and express opinions that conform less to those of others.

House: "I can play the harmonica with my nose, make a penny come out of a child's ear, or any other orifice for that matter, and given the right circumstances bring two women to simultaneous ecstasy." – Episode 16, Season 3

A negative effect of the intellectual liberty that the powerful enjoy is that they are more likely to use stereotypes, because they spend less effort trying to control themselves. Most, if not all, people stereotype on a daily basis. This is because in many social situations stereotypes offer an easy explanation. Given that our social environment is so complex, people often simply cannot resist the simplicity of a stereotype. If you see a hardworking colleague from Korea it is hard not to think about the stereotype that Asians are industrious. If you see a woman who appears indecisive, it is very hard not to think about the stereotype that women are indecisive. Of course, you usually quickly suppress these ideas because you know that you should not judge a book by its cover. Not all Asians are like this and that not all women are like that. But the connection with the ethnicity or gender of the person has already been made and can influence your thinking. Powerful people stereotype more, because they are less likely to censor themselves in that way. House is a prime example of this. Hardly an episode goes by in which he does not offend some social group (although often accompanied by a comment that he is intentionally not discriminating):

House: "I can't ask the black guy or one of the chicks to do it; it'd be insensitive."
(Episode 5, Season 4)

Nun: "Sister Augustine believes in things that aren't real."

House: "I thought that was a job requirement for you people." – Season 1, Episode 5

Conclusion: does power corrupt?

Having reviewed four common effects of power and illustrated how House's behavior is an example for them, there are three important questions to be answered. First, does this mean that—as Lord Acton claimed—power corrupts? Many of the effects reviewed above are quite negative: if people feel powerful they take too many risks, they ignore other people's perspectives, and they voice stereotypes.

House: "Can we forget my vices and get back to my virtues?" (Episode 10, Season 3)

This is certainly true, but on the other hand feelings of power also lead to assertive people who can focus on the bigger picture, who are not too afraid to take risks, and who are more likely to generate creative, novel ideas. The better description is that power does not corrupt, but that it changes the person. The effects of feelings of power are both positive and negative.

The best thing to do therefore would be to manage these effects. The negative effects need to be pruned so that the positive effects can blossom. One would expect that one way in which these negative effects can be pruned is by making people aware of them. One would expect that if we would explain to Dr. House that because of his power he is apt to be influenced in a number of negative ways, he should be able to guard against these negative effects. But you know that House would not. There are some episodes in which House seems to realize that his behavior makes him lonely, but we see no real effort to change it. This is also the case for other people, including ourselves. A great deal of our behavior is difficult to control especially when we have a strong habit of behaving in a certain way or when we have

a maybe hidden advantage of acting in a certain manner. For these reasons it seems very unlikely that House could change the negative aspects of his behavior.

A better way to curb people with power is to change their feelings of power. They should be made aware that their power is not god-given but is conferred onto them by others. Research by the first author and his colleagues has shown that the side-effects of power can be effectively blocked by making the powerful aware that others might see their power as unfair and undeserved (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). This finding illustrates from a psychological point of view the importance of democracy and the separation of power. Power corrupts, but by ensuring that the powerful are controlled by others and cannot take their power for granted, the corrupting effect can at least be limited.

Limiting people with power is a very difficult thing, though. And limiting House is almost impossible. In the series, this Sisyphean task rests on Cuddy's shoulders. As Dean of Medicine, she is House's superior and the only one who can restrict and bridle him.

Cuddy: "I am the only one that can control him." Season 1, Episode 15

Although she is not always successful, Cuddy is the only factor that puts a limit on House's bizarre behavior. This is good for the series. If House would—as Cuddy puts it—run around the hospital like a monkey in a banana factory without restraint, the series would lose its appeal. The struggle between Cuddy and House, even though her attempts only rarely succeed, keeps the series fresh. Moreover, it is good for House and the hospital. If House would be allowed to do whatever he want, at some point he would derail completely. But most important is the wider meaning. Powerful people need to be controlled.

This is an important lesson that extends beyond House. In this chapter we have tried to explain the behavior of Dr. House by what we know about the effects of power. As social

psychologists, we believe that people's behavior can, at least for a great deal, be explained by looking at the social situation they find themselves in. This reductionism may seem somewhat simplistic, but importantly we do not want to claim that these effects can explain all behavior. It is not the case that everyone who has power necessarily is like House. As psychologists we discover order, patterns, and laws in human behavior. These patterns explain a good deal of the differences between people. But it does not explain everything. Success generally leads to happiness but not all successful people are happy. Power leads to over-assertiveness and risk-taking, decreases empathy, and increases stereotyping. But not all powerful people are over-assertive risk-takers who stereotype a lot and have little empathy. By seeing patterns with our experiments, we can predict that people are more likely to behave in this manner in that situation. Even though House's behavior is clearly a caricature, it still can serve as an (exaggerated) illustration of how powerful people as a rule behave. As such, the series can help us to understand the effect of power on the behavior, both of others and of ourselves.

References

- Galinsky, A.D., Gruenfeld, D.H., & Magee, J.C. (2003). From power to action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 453– 466.
- Lammers, J., Galinsky, A.D., Gordijn, E.H., & Otten, S. (2008). Illegitimacy moderates the effects of power on approach. *Psychological Science*, 19, 558–564.