How do social power and social status impact children's social preferences?

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Introduction

- By preschool age, children recognize two dimensions of social rank: social power (e.g., Charafeddine et al., 2020; Gülgöz & Gelman, 2017) and social status (e.g., Enright et al., 2020; Mandalaywala et al., 2020). Social power arises through control over resources and outcomes, while social status arises through voluntary deferral from others due to respect, admiration, and social value (e.g., Anderson et al. 2015; Heck et al., 2022; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Critically, social status, but not social power, is dependent upon others.
- Children are favorably biased toward high ranked individuals over low ranked individuals (Mandalaywala et al., 2020; Shutts et al., 2016), but past research has not examined attitudes toward high power versus high status individuals.
- As part of a larger study, we compared 8- to 10-year-olds' desire to befriend a social power character, a social status character, and a comparison character (positive characteristics, but no rank information). The comparison character allowed us to investigate if children used only positivity to guide their friendship ratings, as social status is often described in positive terms (e.g., prestige), while social power is often described in negative terms (e.g., dominance).
- We expected children to report greater desire for friendship with the social status character than the social power character, given that social status is reliant upon others' perceptions and is likely associated with positivity. Further, if children reported similar ratings for the social status character and comparison character, then it would suggest a general reliance on positivity as compared to status per se for friendship decisions.

Method

- Eight- to 10-year-olds (N = 33; 17 girls) listened to two stories on Zoom. Each story included three characters: a social power character, a social status character, and a comparison character with positive characteristics unrelated to rank. See Figure 1. Prior to each character's description, all characters were described as likeable (e.g., everyone enjoys playing with them).
- Character presentation order was randomized, along with story presentation order. All characters matched participants' gender.
- Children reported their desire to befriend each character (i.e., "How much would you like to be friends with [character name]?") with a visual scale (thumbs down = not at all; thumb in the middle = sort of; thumbs up = a lot). Answers were scored as follows: 0 = not at all, 1 = sort of, 2 = a lot. Answers were summed across stories, resulting in a range of 0 to 4.

Figure 1
Sample Story for Girl Participants

Everyone on Emerson's team **looks up to Emerson.** They **want to ask Emerson** questions throughout the game and **always choose to do what Emerson does**. The team **respects and values Emerson**. Everyone gets snacks during the break, and everyone **chooses to eat the same snack as Emerson**. Everyone says that Emerson knows everything about playing Zios.

Everyone on Taylor's team **has to follow Taylor**. They **have to ask Taylor** before they do anything throughout the game and **Taylor has to say it is okay**. The team **has to follow what Taylor says and they have to listen to Taylor**. Everyone gets snacks during the break, but **Taylor get more snacks than everyone else**. Taylor says that she knows how to play Zios well.

Everyone on Jamie's team **really likes Jamie**. They are always **cheered by Jamie** throughout the game. The team members **always laugh and smile with Jamie**. The team likes that Jamie is **supportive and happy to help the team**. Everyone says that Jamie does not know much about playing Zios.

Figure 2
Mean Friendship Ratings

Results

- A repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant difference in participants' desire to befriend the social power, social status, and comparison characters, $F(1, 29)$ = 146.88, η_p^2 = .82, $p < .001$. See Figure 2.
- Follow-up tests revealed that children reported less desire to befriend the social power character (M = .88, SD = 1.14) than the social status character (M = 3.21, SD = .96), $t(32)$ = 9.84, $p < .001$. Similarly, children reported less desire to befriend the social power character compared to the comparison character (M = 3.36, SD = .74), $t(32)$ = -10.77, $p < .001$. Conversely, there was no significant difference in children's desire to befriend the social status and comparison character, $t(32)$ = -.61, p = .54.
- Friendship ratings were above chance for the social status and comparison characters ($ps < .001$), but below chance for the social power character ($p < .001$).
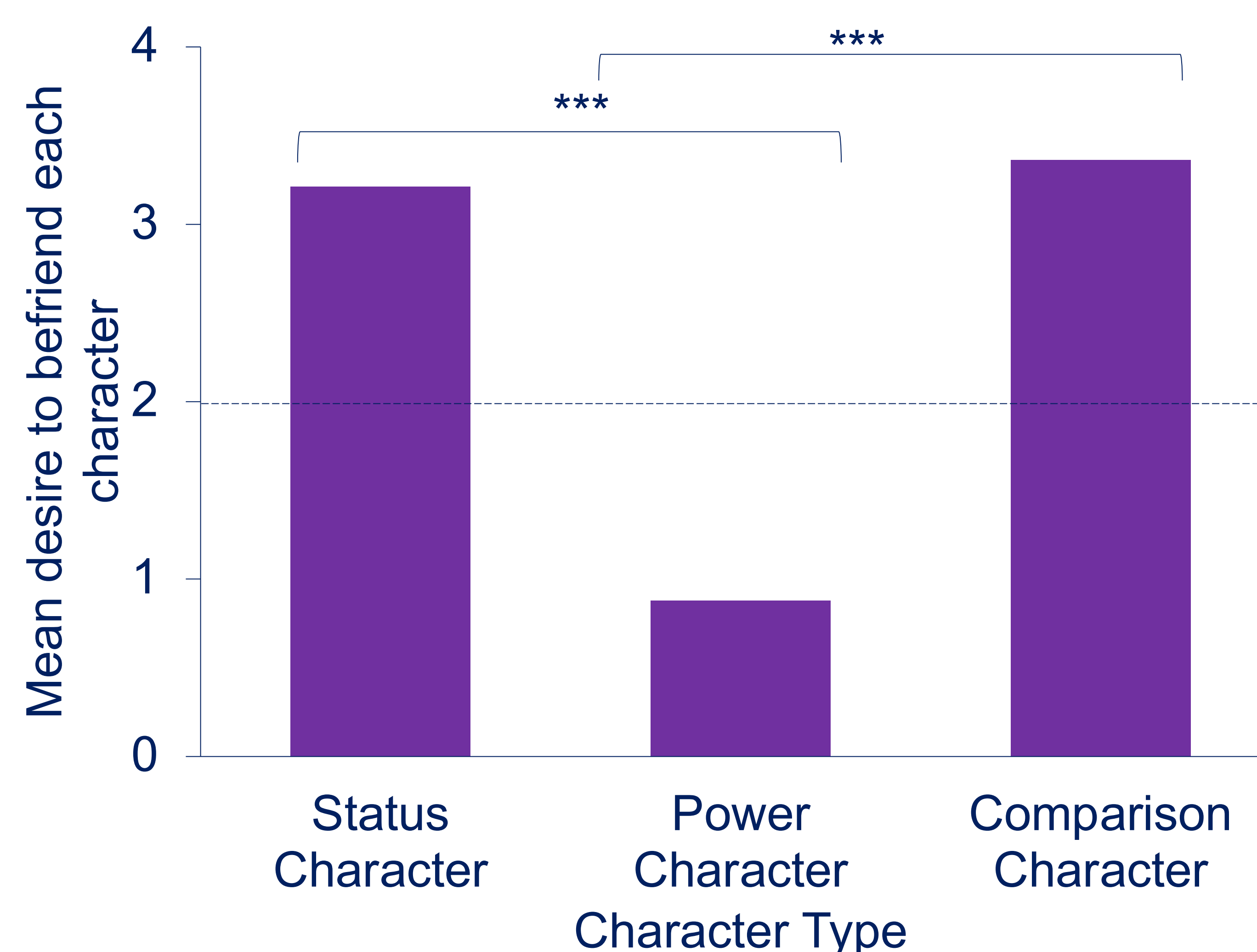
Discussion

- Eight- to 10-year-olds were more willing to befriend the social status character compared to the social power character, and they were as willing to befriend the social status character as the comparison character. Children likely perceived social power information negatively despite the lack of explicitly negative descriptors (i.e., bossy, overbearing). Conversely, children likely perceived social status information positively. In turn, children did not distinguish social status from generally positive information, at least in a friendship context. However, a lack of differentiation between social status and positivity might not extend to alternate contexts. For example, children's criteria for who is more capable to lead might be different then their criteria for friendship.
- The limited desire to befriend the social power character might also indicate that children recognize how social power is not necessarily reliant upon others' perceptions. Thus, one does not need to be perceived positively to have social power. In support of this, research with adults indicates that social power is associated with less regard for others' perspectives (Blader et al., 2016), which might in turn diminish positive perceptions.
- Future research should investigate whether children's friendship evaluations predict their willingness to listen to or follow individuals with social status, social power, or only positive descriptors, along with predictions about leadership competence. This might inform the behaviors children choose to adopt when they seek rank among their peers.

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