

## **Privilege and Social Action**

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This research explores the implications of affect control theory for understanding inequality. By measuring cultural sentiments on the dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity, affect control theory offers a means of quantifying social perceptions of groups' relative status, power, and agency. The theory's impression change models allow us to use these sentiments to predict culturally expected behavior for particular groups in a wide range of interaction scenarios. I collected ratings of 28 gender, sexual, racial/ethnic, national, religious, and class identities on the dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity, then used K-means cluster analysis to identify similarities in patterns of cultural sentiments across identity groups. After establishing the main cultural profiles characterizing groups' relative status and power, I simulated 178 interactions using affect control theory's models of impression change (Heise 2015). Simulations were run for all combinations of actors and object persons within each dimension of inequality (gender/sexual, racial/ethnic, national, religious, and class identities).

Heterosexual, cisgender, and white persons, Americans, Christians, and the rich were pulled into a single cluster, Cluster 1. Groups in this cluster were significantly higher in potency and lower in evaluation than all others in the study. Despite their substantial power advantage over others, these groups were the least respected in the study. Notably, they tended to be seen as benign rather than nefarious, with relatively neutral average evaluation ratings. Groups in Cluster 2 were the second highest in power, with average potency levels just above neutral. While significantly less powerful than groups in Cluster 1, these were the highest status groups in the study. Member groups included bisexual and queer persons, lesbians, Asian Americans, multi-racial persons and persons of color, international students, Africans, Buddhists, and Muslims. Despite their limited power relative to groups in Cluster 1, groups in Cluster 2 are well-respected, with higher status and power than groups in Clusters 3 and 4. Groups in Clusters 3 and 4 were comparable in status – significantly higher in evaluation than groups in Cluster 1 but significantly lower than those in Cluster 2. However, groups in Cluster 3 had average potency levels just below neutral, while those in Cluster 4 were seen as far more powerless – about as powerless as groups in Cluster 1 were powerful. Cluster 3 included gay, transgender, and gender-fluid persons, black, Latino/a, Asian, and Middle Eastern persons, atheists, and spiritual persons. Cluster 4 included Native Americans, immigrants, and the poor.

Simulation results reveal how cultural beliefs about groups' goodness and potency translate into inequalities in interaction. Powerful actors are expected to engage in dominant behavior, while those low in power are expected to act more submissively. Conversely, deferential acts are expected toward powerful object persons, and dominant acts toward objects lower in potency. Uniquely powerful acts are expected when especially privileged actors engage with especially disadvantaged object persons; uniquely submissive acts are expected when especially disadvantaged actors engage with especially privileged object persons. Simulations also revealed that high status actors are expected to behave more nicely than low status actors, and high status objects are expected to be treated more nicely than low status objects. Groups with a modest amount of power may be called upon to act even more nicely than groups lower in power, to signal that they do not pose a threat to more powerful actors.

In short, results suggest that disadvantaged actors are likely to have interactional experiences that limit their capability for powerful action and call on them to behave in nice, enthusiastic ways, even when they are on the receiving end of dominant behavior. When they fail to conform with these expectations, they risk breaching interactional norms, creating deflection, and receiving social sanctions from those working to bring the situation back in line with cultural meanings – to “put them back in their place.” In contrast, privileged actors have opportunities to exercise power in social encounters without risk of violating social expectations. Our expectation of powerful actions from privileged but not disadvantaged actors tends to justify and encourage exactly the sorts of encounters that reinforce the social order.

Table 1: Pairwise Comparisons for the Evaluation, Potency, and Activity of Identity Sentiments by Cluster.

	Evaluation	Potency	Activity	Member Groups
Cluster 1	0.28 <sup>a</sup>	1.63 <sup>a</sup>	0.16 <sup>a</sup>	cisgender, heterosexual, white, American, Christian, rich
Cluster 2	1.25 <sup>b</sup>	0.50 <sup>b</sup>	0.83 <sup>b</sup>	lesbian, bisexual, queer, Asian American, person of color, multi-racial, international student, African, Buddhist, Muslim
Cluster 3	0.82 <sup>c</sup>	-0.15 <sup>c</sup>	0.39 <sup>a,b</sup>	gay, transgender, gender-fluid, black, Latino/a, Asian, Middle Eastern, atheist, spiritual
Cluster 4	0.93 <sup>b,c</sup>	-1.65 <sup>d</sup>	0.54 <sup>a,b</sup>	Native American, immigrant, poor

Note. Cells in a given column with different letters are significantly different.

Figure 1: Evaluation and Potency of Specific Identities by Cluster.

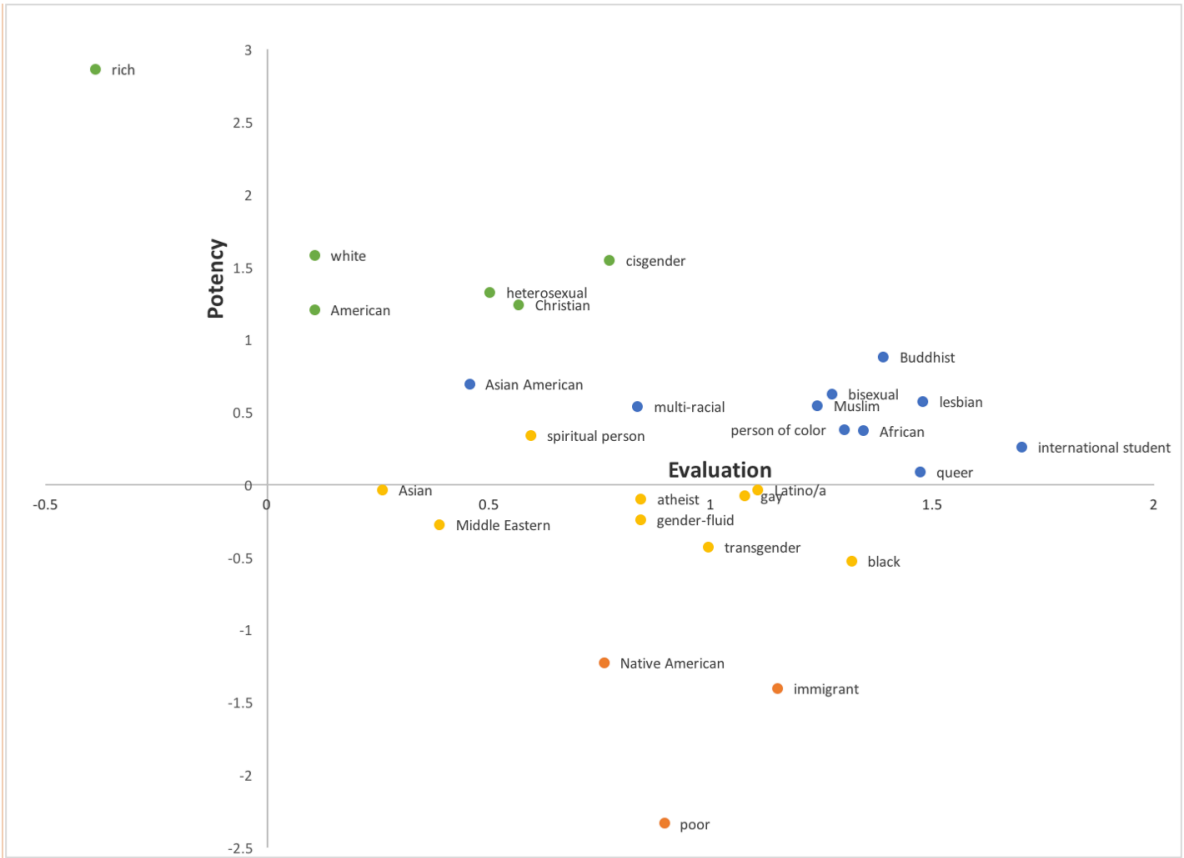


Table 3: Pairwise Comparisons for the Evaluation, Potency, and Activity of Behaviors by Actor Cluster.

	Evaluation	Potency	Activity
Cluster 1	0.46 <sup>a</sup>	1.11 <sup>a</sup>	0.11 <sup>a</sup>
Cluster 2	1.10 <sup>b</sup>	0.25 <sup>b</sup>	0.81 <sup>b</sup>
Cluster 3	0.81 <sup>c</sup>	-0.21 <sup>c</sup>	0.51 <sup>c</sup>
Cluster 4	0.80 <sup>c</sup>	-1.23 <sup>d</sup>	0.79 <sup>b</sup>

Note. Cells in a given column with different letters are significantly different.