

Big Man

Synonyms

A man of stature

Standing tall

Definition

“Big Man” is used to signify both an important individual as well as one large in size

Introduction

The phrase “Big Man” is used to signify both an important individual as well as one large in size, both historically and cross-culturally (B. J. Ellis 1992; Murray and Schmitz 2011; Sahlins 1963). Contemporary English language is also riddled with phrases that highlight an association between size and status (or the lack of it)—“a man of stature”, “standing tall”, “he was belittled”—and the phrase “high status” itself incorporates a vertical dimension. This conflation of size and status across many different language groups and cultures has a rather straightforward explanation: on average, those in position of power or high in status, tend to be taller and bigger than those who are not. Positive associations between size and status have been observed in all kinds of cultural groupings, from hunter-gatherer groups to agricultural populations to industrialised societies (B. J. Ellis 1992; Murray and Schmitz 2011; Sahlins 1963; Stulp and Barrett 2016).

Why are “Big Men” big men?

There are several reasons why bigger or taller individuals tend to reach higher status than those who are smaller and shorter (see discussions in Stulp and Barrett 2016; Stulp et al. 2015; Stulp et al. 2012). First, bigger individuals may have some physical superiority over others, allowing them greater access to resources (which typically is taken to signify some form of “status”). This is often corroborated with cross-species evidence: in many species, larger males may display a substantial advantage in fights with other males over access to resources and females (L. Ellis 1994). A second reason is that size, or at least height, is positively associated with health (Stulp and Barrett 2016). Such an association can arise when favourable childhood growth conditions (plenty of nutritional resources during development) lead to a both a healthier and larger physique. Good childhood conditions may also favour the development of better cognitive skills, leading to a positive association between height and measures of intelligence, thus offering a third reason why taller men may occupy positions of higher status (Silventoinen et al. 2006). In societies with heritable material wealth (e.g., land, money), the association between size and status can also arise because of a fourth process, whereby an individual inherits both favourable growth conditions and social status. All of these reasons, either alone or in combination, may account for positive cross-cultural patterns between size and status, and why individuals of high status are often described as “big men”.

In contemporary industrialised populations, where physical force is prohibited by law, physical superiority is likely to play a marginal role in achieving higher status (Stulp et al. 2015). Nevertheless, consistent positive associations are observed between male and female height and various proxies of social status. An additional factor that might contribute to these positive associations are biased perceptions relating to height and

overall body size: taller individuals, particularly men, are perceived to be more attractive, intelligent, competent, dominant, and better leaders (Blaker and Van Vugt 2014). The increased social status accorded to taller individuals (on average) may thus arise due to preferential treatment in response to such perceptions. Indeed, studies suggest that tall individuals experience positive discrimination in the labour force, and also that people also seem to favour tall(er) individuals as their political leader (Stulp et al. 2013; Murray and Schmitz 2011). Thus, the positive association between height and status in contemporary populations may be at least partly due to perceptions and biases that do not necessarily correspond to an individual's actual patterns or ability. Indeed, although consistent positive associations are observed between height and several measures of social status (most readily explained by favourable childhood circumstances), the strength of these associations is typically very low in magnitude. The perceptual links between size and status may therefore be somewhat out of proportion to the actual link between the two. Ironically then, the use of phrases like "Big Man" and "belittled", may actually contribute to the persistence of an association between size and status because such phrases undoubtedly feed into perceptions associated with size.

Conclusion

"Big Man" clearly is not a gender-neutral term, which reflects the fact that men historically have been more likely to hold political power and leadership positions, not least because men are physically much stronger than women (on average), which seems to be one of the requirements for leadership in earlier times. The times, though, are changing: women in industrialised populations often achieve high status and positions of leadership, and on some measures of status (such as education) women

outrank men in several populations. Moreover, in more equal societies, the gap in height between those of low and high status is closing. If this trend continues, phrases like “Big Man”, “a man of stature”, and “standing tall” will continue to be less relevant.

Cross-References

Size and Dominance

Height and Dominance

References

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