

LOOKING UP, KNEELING DOWN: WHY THE POSITION MATTERS

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Most religious traditions are built upon strict power distinctions between humans and the superhuman/divine. While superhuman entities are often described as omnipotent or having supernatural powers, humans are presented as weak, humble and powerless.

Some traditions accentuate this distinction not only in teachings, but also in visual representations and demands of visible submissive behaviour towards the superhuman agents. Apart from culturally grounded cues of power and dominance, **verticality** is often used as a basis to distinguish the powerful from the subordinate, both visually and as a bodily expression.

Recent research in perception and metaphor shows a direct connection between the placement and size of a stimulus (semantic or visual) and the estimation of its importance and power. Stimuli placed high in a vertical space are perceived as more powerful and as more dominant, whereas those placed on lower positions as inferior (Meier, Hauser, Robinson, Friesen, & Schjeldahl, 2007; Robinson, Zabelina, Ode & Moeller, 2008; Meier, & Dionne, 2009; Giessner, Ryan, Quaquebeke, & Schubert, 2011). Similarly, open and expansive bodily positions (standing) are connected to dominant behaviour, while closed, collapsed and lowered postures are perceived as expressing submission and obedience.

Current theorizing in the area of **embodied cognition** claims that bodily positions and environmental settings (Joye & Verpoeten, 2013) play an important role in the composition of **specific embodied states**. Thus, bodily positions are not just the result of some antecedent emotional state; they are a necessary part of the emergence and shaping of emotional states. Experimental evidence supports this assertion for many bodily postures; however, to date there has yet to be a research program focusing on submissive positions and dominance cues in religious rituals. In the light of existing research, I argue that submissive bodily positions in religious rituals are not mere expressions of subordination, but that they establish and modulate the submissive attitude and behaviour towards superhuman agents.

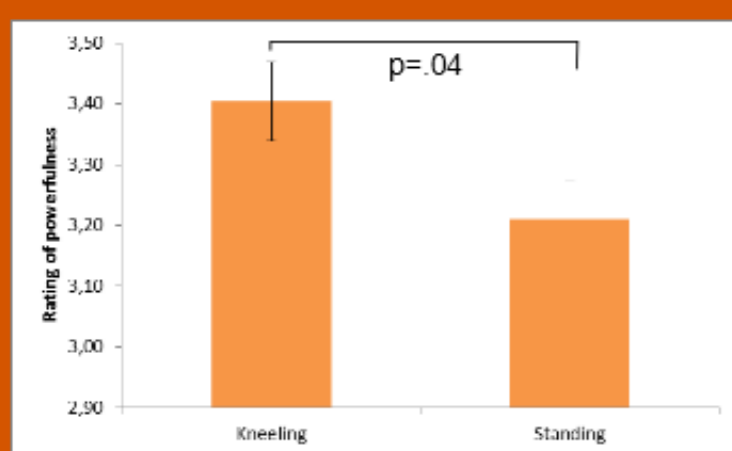


Hypotheses

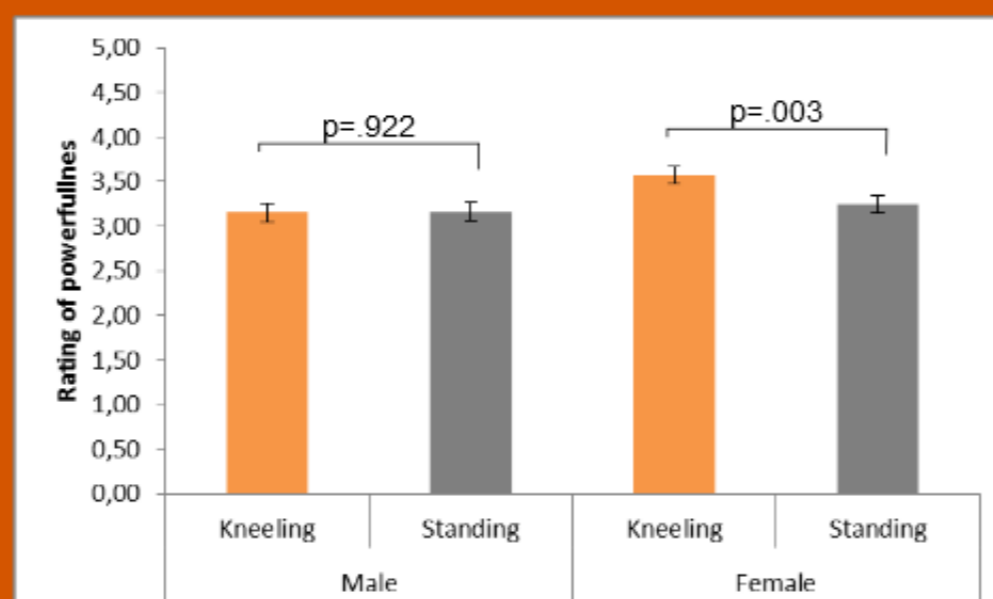
- I. Participants in a kneeling position will evaluate depicted deities as more powerful than participants in a standing position.
- II. Deities in higher spatial positions will be evaluated as more powerful than those in lower spatial positions.

Results

Mean ratings of powerfulness (all deities together)

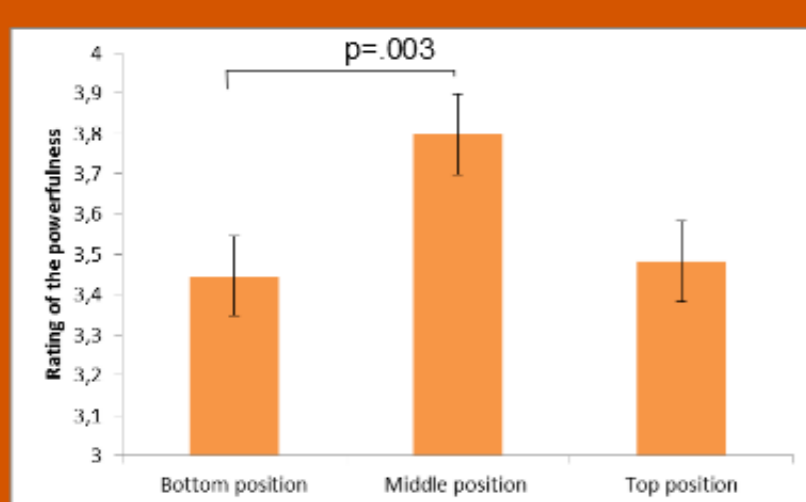


There was a significant difference in ratings of powerfulness between kneeling ($M = 3.40$, $SD = .48$) and standing ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .49$) conditions [$t(111) = 2.117$, $p = .036$].



There was a significant difference in ratings of powerfulness for females between kneeling ($M = 3.58$, $SD = .45$) and standing ($M = 3.24$, $SD = .43$) conditions [$t(65) = 3.094$, $p = .003$], but no significant difference in ratings for males between kneeling ($M = 3.15$, $SD = .42$) and standing ($M = 3.16$, $SD = .57$) conditions [$t(44) = -.099$, $p = .922$].

Mean ratings of powerfulness (different positions of pictures)



Results from Linear Mixed Models controlling for random effects of individual raters:

The bar graph shows a significant difference between bottom ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .10$) and middle ($M = 3.80$, $SD = .12$) position [$t(454) = 3.031$, $p = .003$] and no difference between bottom ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .10$) and top ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .12$) position [$t(454) = .303$, $p = .762$].

Methods

Participants	Total	Kneeling	Standing
n	113 (67 females)	57 (34 females)	56 (33 females)
Mean age (years)	21,9	21,9	21,9

Participants were recruited from a university course and obtained a credit for their participation.

Introduction to the study

Before the experimental manipulation, participants read a short introductory text about the Hindu pantheon, that stressed the hierarchy, status and personality characteristics differences of deities.

Stimuli

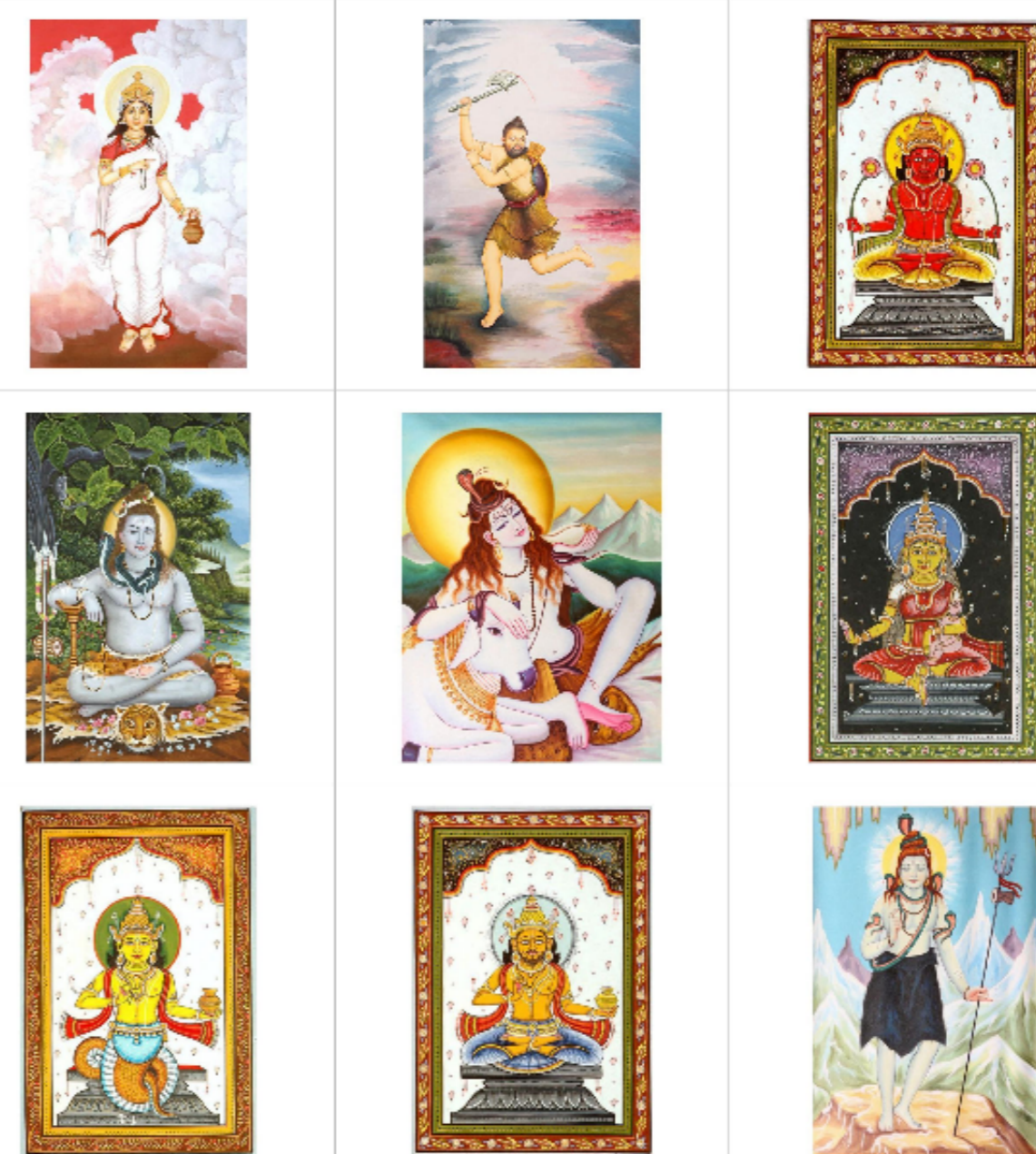
9 pictures of Hindu deities (chosen in preliminary study; ratings of power between deities did not significantly differ), balanced positioning of pictures

Manipulation

While assuming the assigned position (standing or kneeling), participants were asked to rate each deity on 4 dimensions (powerfulness, kindness, punishment, compassion). Pictures were shown in sequence, other pictures than the actual one were masked.

Pictures used as stimuli were downloaded from <http://exoticindia.com/>

Participants were unfamiliar with the deities.



On average, participants assumed the position for 10 minutes while rating the deities.

Findings

- Effect of body posture on ratings of deity power
- Females drive the effect
- Differences in ascribed power found only between middle and bottom positions (not top and bottom as hypothesized).
- No significant difference for other characteristics (kindness, punishing, compassion) between conditions or order of pictures.

Questions & Future directions

Possible sex differences in sensitivity to bodily positions of submission

Are there sex differences in reactions to own submissive bodily positions?

Possible sex difference in power ascription to deities

Are sex differences in the context-sensitivity of dominance perceptions also reflected in evaluating power of deities? (Watkins, Debruine, Feinberg & Jones, 2013)

Possible sex difference in the concept of the power of a deity

Does the sex difference in perception of dominance extend to the conceptual level of the power of a deity?

Cultural differences in ascribing power to deities

Does the ascription of power to deities vary according to their association with outgroups or ingroups?

Cultural reinforcement of the effect

Does the effect vary across different cultural traditions and/or across the lifespan?

Literature

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