

### PSYCHOLOGY

## Believe in the effect

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Social psychology research has long asked how beliefs about social status can affect behaviour, suggesting, for example, that people who believe they are in a powerful position in a dyadic interaction perform cognitive tasks better than those who think they're playing a lowly role. But are these effects truly driven by participants' beliefs about their social status, or may behaviour instead be influenced by social signals sent by the experimenter?

Thandiwe Gilder of Bangor University and Erin Heerey of Western University addressed this question in a series of experiments, in which they varied which social role participants were playing and the experimenters' beliefs about participants' role. They found that participants did respond faster and more accurately in some conditions than others. But it wasn't the subjects' belief about their status that mattered. Instead, participants were faster or more accurate when experimenters' believed they were in the role associated with faster and more accurate responses.

This research highlights two important aspects: first, it shows that subtle social beliefs can have real effects on behaviour. Second, it emphasizes how important it is for scientific progress that previous results are put to the test.

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