

Power corrupts, especially when it lacks status

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Ever wonder why that government clerk was so rude and condescending? Or why the mid-level manager at your company always doles out the most demeaning tasks? Or, on a more profound level, why the guards at Abu Ghraib tortured and humiliated their prisoners?

In a new study, researchers at USC, Stanford and the Kellogg School of Management have found that individuals in roles that possess power but lack status have a tendency to engage in activities that demean others. According to the study, "The Destructive Nature of Power without Status," the combination of some authority and little perceived status can be a toxic combination.

The research, forthcoming in the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#), is "based on the notions that a) low-status is threatening and aversive and b) power frees people to act on their internal states and feelings." The study was conducted by Nathanael Fast, assistant professor of management and organization at the USC Marshall School of Business; Nir Halevy, acting assistant professor of [organizational behavior](#) at the Stanford Graduate School of Business; and Adam Galinsky, professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

To test their theses, the authors conducted an experiment with students who were told they would be interacting with a fellow student in a business exercise and were randomly assigned to either a high-status "Idea Producer" role or low-status "Worker" role. Then these individuals

were asked to select activities from a list of 10 for the others to perform; some of the tasks were more demeaning than others.

The experiment demonstrated that "individuals in high-power/low-status roles chose more demeaning activities for their partners (e.g., bark like a dog three times) than did those in any other combination of power and status roles."

According to the study, possessing power in the absence of status may have contributed to the acts committed by U.S. soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2004. That incident was reminiscent of behaviors exhibited during the famous Stanford Prison Experiment with undergraduate students that went awry in the early 1970s. In both cases the guards had power, but they lacked respect and admiration in the eyes of others and in both cases prisoners were treated in extremely demeaning ways.

Fast said that he and his colleagues focused on the relationship between power and status because "although a lot of work has looked at these two aspects of hierarchy, it has typically looked at the isolated effects of either power or status, not both. We wanted to understand how those two aspects of hierarchy interact. We predicted that when people have a role that gives them power but lacks status—and the respect that comes with that status—then it can lead to demeaning behaviors. Put simply, it feels bad to be in a low status position and the power that goes with that role gives them a way to take action on those negative feelings."

Social hierarchy, the study says, does not on its own generate demeaning tendencies. In other words, the idea that power always corrupts may not be entirely true. Just because someone has power or, alternatively, is in a "low status" role does not mean they will mistreat others. Rather, "power and status interact to produce effects that cannot be fully explained by studying only one or the other basis of hierarchy."

One way to overcome this dynamic, according to the authors, is to find ways for all individuals, regardless of the status of their roles, to feel respected and valued. The authors write: "...respect assuages negative feelings about their low-status roles and leads them to treat others positively."

Opportunities for advancement may also help. "If an individual knows he or she may gain a higher status role in the future, or earn a bonus for treating others well, that may help ameliorate their negative feelings and behavior," Fast said.

The researchers conclude, however, that, "Our findings indicate that the experience of having power without [status](#), whether as a member of the military or a college student participating in an experiment, may be a catalyst for producing demeaning behaviors that can destroy relationships and impede goodwill."

Provided by University of Southern California

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