

Powerful people overestimate their height

January 9 2012, By Mary Catt

(Medical Xpress) -- The psychological experience of power makes people feel taller than they are, according to research by ILR School associate professor of organizational behavior Jack Goncalo and a Washington University colleague.

"Although a great deal of research has shown that physically imposing individuals are more likely to acquire power, this work is the first to show that the powerful may actually feel taller than they are," Goncalo and Michelle Duguid write in an upcoming issue of [Psychological Science](#).

So a 5-foot-4-inch woman might actually sprout an inch or two in her own mind when she's having an empowered moment. In other words, there is actually a physical experience that goes along with feeling powerful.

Three experiments with 266 American men and women confirmed for Goncalo and Duguid that there is a relationship between feelings of power and one's self-perception of height.

"Using different manipulations of power and measures of perceived height, we found that people literally perceived themselves as taller when they occupied a more powerful position," they write.

Is that perhaps why, Goncalo and Duguid wonder, BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg referred to Gulf of Mexico oil spill victims as "small people?"

Research -- included assigning one's height to a [video game](#) avatar --established a starting point for exploring [reciprocity](#) between the psychological and physical experiences of power, Goncalo said.

He added that the research begs a number of questions: Do short people attempt to capture power by physically elevating themselves above others? Would it be possible to psychologically empower people by giving them an office on the top floor? Can feeling powerful make leaders less able to feel [empathy](#) and relate to the "little [people](#)" because they literally feel bigger? Is it possible that BP's CEO gave us an insider's view on the experience of power?

Maybe the powerful really do feel bigger than the rest of us.

Provided by Cornell University

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