

Power can increase generosity to future generations, according to research

July 20 2015, by Gregory Phillips



Conventional wisdom suggests power can lead to corruption, but new research from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business suggests power can bring with it some previously unseen benevolence.

Kimberly Wade-Benzoni found that [power](#)—the ability to control the

behavior or experiences of others in contexts great or small, from world leaders to individual choices—can increase feelings of responsibility toward [future generations](#).

"Previous research focusing on the relationship between contemporaries found that having power tends to cause people to act in more self-interested ways," Wade-Benzoni said. "We add the dimension of time, and we find in contrast that power leads people to act more generously toward [future](#) generations."

Wade-Benzoni studied the effects of power with Leigh Plunkett Tost of the University of Michigan and the University of Washington's Hana Huang Johnson. Their findings, "Noblesse oblige emerges (with time): Power enhances intergenerational beneficence," were recently published in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

"In the day and age of nuclear weapons, deficit financing, dramatic global-scale environmental change, and genetic engineering, we have unprecedented power to shape the future," Wade-Benzoni said. "Future generations are often dependent on earlier generations to be their voice, since they may not be born when earlier generations make decisions that affect them."

The team performed a series of studies. One involved 222 participants, half of whom were asked to write about a time they experienced power over others. A subsequent survey found members of that group more likely to allocate charitable donations to a cause with long-term benefits than one addressing an immediate need. The participants who did not write about power were no more likely to donate to either type of cause.

Another study had half of 465 participants complete the same writing task, then allocate a potential \$1,000 bonus to themselves now or a larger amount to themselves in the future, or to another participant now or a

greater amount to the other person in the future. Those who were asked to recall an experience of power were more likely to defer the bonus to someone else in the future.

Members of another sample of 165 participants were randomly assigned to control the tasks that other group members performed in a group activity. The controlling participants were found in a survey to be likely to allocate more potential future lottery winnings to another member of their team than team members who did not control assignments.

"We found that people who were in positions of power allocated more money to others in the future as compared to the present," Wade-Benzoni said. "Further, we found that an important underlying cause of this effect is that feelings of power invoke a sense of responsibility to look out for the interests of others. Studying the effect of power in the intergenerational context enabled us to extend our understanding of power by identifying circumstances under which power can make people more generous to others." Wade-Benzoni said the research highlights ways in which the effects of power can be channeled for social benefit.

"It may be possible to channel the behavior of power holders in pro-social ways by emphasizing the effects of their decisions on future generations," she said. "Organizations seeking to ensure that decision makers consider the long-term impact of their decisions should consider highlighting that those with decision-making authority have the power to shape not only their own current performance, but also the performance and outcomes of the generations to come."

More information: "Noblesse oblige emerges (with time): Power enhances intergenerational beneficence," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Volume 128, May 2015, Pages 61-73, ISSN 0749-5978, [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2015.03.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2015.03.003)

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