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Power promotes hypocrisy, study finds

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2009 may well be remembered for its scandal-ridden headlines, from admissions of extramarital affairs by governors and senators, to corporate executives flying private jets while cutting employee benefits, and most recently, to a mysterious early morning car crash in Florida. The past year has been marked by a series of moral transgressions by powerful figures in political, business and celebrity circles.



A new study explores why powerful people – many of whom take a moral high ground – don't practice what they preach. Above, a session of U.S. Congress prepares to listen to the president's State of the Union Speech in a 2003 White House photo.

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Researchers sought to determine whether power inspires hypocrisy, the tendency

to hold high standards for others while performing morally suspect behaviors oneself. The research found that power makes people stricter in moral judgment of others – while going easier on themselves.

The research was conducted by Joris Lammers and Diederik A. Stapel of Tilburg University in the Netherlands, and by Adam Galinsky of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. The article is to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Psychological Science*.

“This research is especially relevant to the biggest scandals of 2009, as we look back on how private behavior often contradicted the public stance of particular individuals in power,” said Galinsky. “For instance, we saw some politicians use public funds for private benefits while calling for smaller government, or have extramarital affairs while advocating family values. Similarly, we witnessed CEOs of major financial institutions accepting executive bonuses while simultaneously asking for government bailout money.”

“According to our research, power and influence can cause a severe disconnect between public judgment and private behavior, and as a result, the powerful are stricter in their judgment of others while being more lenient toward their own actions,” he continued.

To simulate an experience of power, the researchers assigned roles of high-power and low-power positions to a group of study participants. Some were assigned the role of prime minister and others civil servant. The participants were then presented with moral dilemmas related to breaking traffic rules, declaring taxes, and returning a stolen bike.

Through a series of five experiments, the researchers examined the impact of power on moral hypocrisy. For example, in one experiment the “powerful” participants condemned the cheating of others while cheating more themselves. High-power participants also tended to condemn over-reporting of travel expenses. But, when given a chance to cheat on a dice game to win lottery tickets (played alone in a private cubicle), the powerful people reported winning a higher amount of lottery tickets than did low-power participants.

Three additional experiments further examined the degree to which powerful people accept their own moral transgressions versus those committed by others. In all cases, those assigned to high-power roles showed significant hypocrisy by more strictly judging others for speeding, dodging taxes and keeping a stolen bike, while finding it more acceptable to engage in these behaviors themselves, the researchers said.

Galinsky said hypocrisy has its greatest impact among people who are legitimately powerful. In contrast, a fifth experiment found that people who don’t feel personally entitled to their power are actually harder on themselves than they

are on others, a phenomenon the researchers dubbed “hypercrisy.” The tendency to be harder on the self than on others also characterized the powerless in multiple studies.

“Ultimately, patterns of hypocrisy and hypercrisy perpetuate social inequality. The powerful impose rules and restraints on others while disregarding these restraints for themselves, whereas the powerless collaborate in reproducing social inequality because they don’t feel the same entitlement,” Galinsky concluded.