The psychology of power

Absolutely

Power corrupts, but it corrupts only those who think they deserve it
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REPORTS of politicians who have extramarital affairs while complaining about the death of family values, or who use public funding for private gain despite condemning government waste, have become so common in recent years that they hardly seem surprising anymore. Anecdotally, at least, the connection between power and hypocrisy looks obvious.

Anecdote is not science, though. And, more subtly, even if anecdote is correct, it does not answer the question of whether power tends to corrupt, as Lord Acton's dictum has it, or whether it merely attracts the corruptible. To investigate this question Joris Lammers at Tilburg University, in the Netherlands, and Adam Galinsky at Northwestern University, in Illinois, have conducted a series of experiments which attempted to elicit states of powerfulness and powerlessness in the minds of volunteers. Having done so, as they report in *Psychological Science*, they tested those volunteers' moral pliability. Lord Acton, they found, was right.

In their first study, Dr Lammers and Dr Galinsky asked 60 university students to write about a moment in their past when they were in a position of high or low power. Previous research has established that this is an effective way to "prime" people into feeling as if they are currently in such a position. Each group (high power and low power) was then split into two further groups. Half were asked to rate, on a nine-point morality scale (with one being highly immoral and nine being highly moral), how objectionable it would be for other people to over-report travel expenses at work. The other half were asked to participate in a game of dice.

In the case of the travel expenses—when the question hung on the behavior of others—participants in the high-power group reckoned, on average, that over-reporting rated as a 5.8 on the nine-point scale. Low-power participants rated it 7.2. The powerful, in other words, claimed to favor the moral course. In the dice game, however, high-power participants reported, on average, that they had rolled 70 while low-power individuals reported an average 59. Though the low-power people were probably cheating a bit (the expected average score would be 50), the high-power volunteers were undoubtedly cheating—perhaps taking the term "high roller" rather too literally.

Taken together, these results do indeed suggest that power tends to corrupt and to promote a hypocritical tendency to hold other people to a higher standard than oneself.