

**Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Awards for Research on Human Decision Processes
Research Grant Proposal**

Project Title: **Does Power Lead to Unethical Behavior?**

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Motivation:

The relationship between power and unethical behavior is complex and not well understood. The idea that power is a corrupting force is frequently referred to in conversation and in the media, often in the form of the well-known quote "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This idea is contradicted by the concept of noblesse oblige, which obligates those of high rank to act honorably and responsibly. Despite this tension, surprisingly little research has been done to tease apart the circumstances under which power leads to more or less ethical behavior.

While the research on the topic has not connected power directly to unethical behavior, it demonstrates a link between power and perceptions or behaviors which might conceivably lead to unethical behavior. In an experiment, Kipnis showed that power over a subordinate led participants to increase their attempts to influence the subordinate, and to increase the extent to which they believed they were responsible for the success of the subordinate's work (1972). This finding is supported by a meta-analysis which shows that generally, as an individual's power increases, her performance ratings of others decrease and her assessment of her own performance increases (Georgeson & Harris, 1998). These perceptions might form the basis that a powerful individual could use to rationalize unethical behaviors, such as taking a disproportionately large share for oneself, but it is not clear whether or not power alone is sufficient to significantly impact unethical behaviors.

There is also some evidence that power can ennoble, however the research suggests that this occurs largely when powerful individuals are given incentives to help. In contrast to Fiske's "power as control model", which suggests that powerful individuals tend to stereotype low-power individuals (1993), Overbeck and Park found that powerful individuals are actually more capable of individuating subordinates, but do so only if they are given people-centered goals versus product-centered goals (Overbeck and Park, 2006). Likewise, Tjosvold found that increased power to help did increase helping behaviors, but not in the absence of rewards for helping (1985). This work suggests that powerful individuals might in some ways be more capable or willing to help others but because these effects are largely driven by incentives, this work is far from conclusive regarding the effect of power on ethical behavior.

While this literature has identified certain tendencies associated with power which might lead to unethical behavior, power and true unethical behavior have never been related in an experimental setting. In the present research, we plan to test this link directly by measuring blatantly unethical behaviors, such as lying and stealing, committed by lab participants. Additionally, much of the extant research has focused primarily on the actions and perceptions of high power individuals. In the proposed research, we will also investigate a concept which has been largely neglected by this literature: powerlessness. By examining both the high and lower power parties we hope to gain a better understanding of the relationship between power and ethical behavior. Third, we will compare high and low power conditions to a control condition where power is not salient,

to test whether the mere presence of a power asymmetry, in either direction, can effect ethical behavior compared to a situation where power is not salient.

Hypotheses:

There are theoretical reasons why both powerful and powerless individuals might engage in unethical behavior. Research by Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson suggests that power leads to an “approach” response, which is characterized by a focus on rewards, positive affect, automatic information processing, and disinhibited behavior (2003). We propose that this response, which would draw attention away from potential punishments and inhibitions would cause powerful individuals to commit more unethical acts. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Individuals primed with high power will act less ethically than those primed with low power.

At the same time, any mention of power might change the way an individual acts in a given situation. For instance, Tenbrunsel and Massick demonstrated that low-level sanctioning systems lowered the level of ethical behavior of subjects because it changed their decision type from an ethical decision to a business decision based on an expected value calculation of getting caught (1999). In the same way, a power imbalance might signal to participants that they are involved in a game which is to be played strategically rather than ethically. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Individuals who are not primed with high or low power will act more ethically than those primed with either high or low power.

A deeper understanding of how the structure of power relationships influences ethical behavior will not only enrich our understanding of the relationship between power and ethics. It will also inform prescriptions geared toward minimizing ethical behavior through various power structures as well as provide guidelines about which situations are most likely to produce unethical behavior, and thus should be monitored most closely.

Proposed Study:

In our pilot study, our sample was too small to produce significant results, but we found directional support for our hypotheses. Participants were primed with high power or low power, or were not primed with either. They then scored their own work and paid themselves according to their performance for a task they had completed earlier in the experiment. The experiment was set up such that it appeared that experimenters would not be able to tell whether subjects scored themselves honestly or dishonestly or whether they took more money than they earned, but there was a system in place to identify how many subjects had cheated in each condition, and how much money was stolen in each case.

Seven out of fourteen (50%) of the participants primed with high power awarded themselves more money than they earned. Of those primed with low power, four out of eleven (36%) cheated, while in the neutral condition only three out of fourteen (21%) cheated. In assessing whether there were differences in the amount stolen, we must also consider the number of opportunities to steal. (For every round in which the participants rightfully earned a dollar, and they did not have the opportunity to steal that dollar.) In the high and low power conditions, participants stole in 29% of the cases where they had the

opportunity to steal, compared to only 12% in the neutral condition. The proposed study will continue along similar lines, but with a larger sample size and with some modifications to strengthen the manipulation and avoid suspicion.

Summary:

The purpose of this study is to elucidate the ways in which different power relationships impact ethical behavior. This work will enrich our understanding of the susceptibility of our ethicality to certain environmental stimuli. It will also inform prescriptions on how to best structure or frame power relationships to help encourage ethical behavior in the workplace.

Budget:

Participant payments:	\$ 900 (30% * \$15 (avg. payment)* 200 subjects)
Research assistance:	\$ 350 (\$10*35 hours)
Conference travel:	\$1,000 (Trip to IACM Budapest, Summer 2007)
Materials (photocopying, etc.):	\$ 100
Total	\$2,350

This study is not currently being supported by any other grants. The OPIM department currently provides \$800 toward travel for doctoral students, but that money is typically spent on other conferences. I currently have about \$1000 left from last year's allotment which is being used on a different project.

Advisor Signature:



References:

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