

THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

Departmental Research Seminar

How Power Shapes Judgments of Culpability: Shield or Liability?

By

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Venue : M802, PolyU

Abstract

Powerholders can be the object of great respect and admiration, but they may also be distrusted and “cancelled” in the court of public opinion. This raises the question of whether power is an asset or a detriment when one is implicated in wrongdoing. Different theoretical perspectives informed competing hypotheses, suggesting that power may either decrease (shielding hypothesis) or increase (liability hypothesis) judgments of culpability. Here, we report five studies (four preregistered) that addressed this conundrum, using diverse transgressions, methods, and samples. Participants in Study 1 judged higher-power players to be likelier sources of deceitful die-rolling reports than lower-power players, and they trusted them less in an incentivized behavioral trust game. Participants in Study 2 rated higher-power actors as more probable perpetrators of financial fraud than lower-power actors, and this effect was mediated by perceived impunity (i.e., powerholders seemingly believing they can get away with anything). Study 3 was an archival study of 97,628 forum posts about diverse transgressions where there is ambiguity about who is the culprit, and users render judgements. Coding revealed that higher-power posters were about twice as likely to be deemed guilty than lower-power posters. In Study 4 we tested whether people who are not punished for a transgression appear more powerful, providing further support for the role of perceived impunity. Finally, Study 5 excluded generic power saliency as an alternative explanation, and replicated the mediation via perceived impunity. These findings show that, besides many perks, power comes with perils in the form of ascribed culpability.

Prof. Gerben A. van Kleef is a professor of social psychology at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His main research programs revolve around emotion, power/hierarchy, social norms, conflict, and cooperation. In studying these topics, he combines social-psychological approaches with insights from various other disciplines, including organizational behavior, evolutionary science, biology, behavioral economics, and law. Prof. Kleef has served as associate editor of *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *Cognition and Emotion*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, and *Journal of Applied Psychology*. He has held visiting positions at UC Berkeley, Columbia University, and Stanford University. He is an elected fellow of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, and the Association for Psychological Science.

All interested are welcome.



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