

Decision Processes Colloquium

Monday, February 6, 2012

Where: JMHH 245

When: 12:00 noon to 1:20 PM

Dana R. Carney

Assistant Professor

Haas Management of Organizations Group

University of California - Berkeley

Does Power Corrupt? Or Does Power Buffer Stress-- For Better *and* For Worse?

Does Power Corrupt? Or does power simply buffer stress? Across human and nonhuman animals, power is associated with many wonderful things such as an action orientation, a tolerance for risk, and an endocrine profile which aids in disease resistance (high testosterone coupled with low cortisol). However, power has also been linked with corrupt acts such as derogating and objectifying others, failing to return others' belongings, and an increased likelihood of deception. Drawing from research in primatology, neuroscience, physiology, and neuroendocrinology, a picture emerges which may be able to reconcile how power can simultaneously lead to such good and such bad things: power appears to enhance the very same emotional, cognitive, and physiological systems which acts of corruption deplete. In this presentation, the beginning of a theory is advanced which describes how power may promote corrupt behavior through a stress-buffering mechanism whereby power decreases the emotional, cognitive, and physiological costs of corrupt acts and ordinary stressful experiences alike. Six studies are presented which demonstrate that: (1) power leads to an increase in the dominance hormone testosterone and a decrease in the stress hormone cortisol—an endocrine profile ideal for enduring stress, (2) testosterone is associated with a decreased threshold for aversive acts, (3) power buffers the stress response in a high-stakes lie and (4) in a stressful social speech task, (5) power buffers the threat response in social exclusion, and (6) power buffers the stress of physical pain. Taken together, these findings provide the first empirical support for the hypothesis that one mechanism through which power may corrupt is by buffering us from the stress of otherwise aversive acts.