

Researcher finds power and corruption may be good for society

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They are familiar scenes: politicians bemoaning the death of family values only for extramarital affairs to be unveiled or politicians preaching financial sacrifice while their expense accounts fatten up.

Moral [corruption](#) and power asymmetries are pervasive in human societies, but as it turns out, that may not be such a bad thing.

Francisco Ubeda, an [evolutionary biology](#) professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and Edgar Duéñez of Harvard University found that power and corruption may play a role in maintaining overall societal cooperation.

Using game theory, Ubeda and Duéñez looked at what causes individuals in society to cooperate even though those in charge display some level of corruption. They developed a model that allows individuals who are responsible for punishing noncooperators (e.g., law enforcers and government officials) to fail to cooperate themselves by acting in a corrupt manner. They also considered the possibility that these law enforcers, by virtue of their positions, are able to sidestep punishment when they are caught failing to cooperate.

What they found is that the bulk of society cooperates because there are law enforcers forcing them to stay in line. People tend to cooperate because they do not want to get punished.

Even if the law enforcers consider themselves above the law and behave

in a corrupt way, overall societal cooperation is maintained – as long as there is a small amount of power and corruption. However, if the law enforcers have too much power and corruption runs rampant, overall societal cooperation breaks down.

Ubeda explained how it works:

"Law enforcers often enjoy privileges that allow them to avoid the full force of the law when they breach it. Law enforcing results in the general public abiding by the law. Thus law enforcers enjoy the benefits of a lawful society and are compensated for their law enforcing by being able to dodge the law," he said.

The researchers concluded that power and corruption benefit society; without law enforcers, individuals have less incentive to cooperate and without power and corruption, law enforcers have less incentive to do their job.

The researchers' findings have far-reaching implications. In biology, they may help explain corrupt behaviors in social insects. In economics, the findings may aid in formulating policies by providing insights on how to harness corruption to benefit society. In the field of psychology, the findings provide a justification to the correlation between power and corruption observed in humans.

More information: A report of their research is published in the journal *Evolution* and can be viewed online at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291558-5646/earlyview>.

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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