When workers feel powerless, they get paranoid—and aggressive

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When employees lack power at work, they can feel vulnerable and paranoid. In turn, that paranoia can cause people to lash out against colleagues or family members and even seek to undermine their organization's success, according to new research from the University at

Buffalo School of Management.

The study, forthcoming in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, is [available online now](link).

"History is filled with examples of individuals with little [power](link) being subjugated and objectified, causing many people to associate low power with vulnerability," says Min-Hsuan Tu, Ph.D., assistant professor of organization and human resources in the UB School of Management. "Here, we demonstrate that when employees think they lack power in their workplace, they can feel threatened and become paranoid."

This feeling is common, Tu says. For example, consider an entry-level staffer who closely guards her work, afraid she won't be able to stand up for herself if another employee takes credit for it. If you've ever stressed over why a co-worker sent you a terse email or didn't respond at all—"Does she dislike me?" "Is he trying to push me off this project?"—you've experienced it too.

To test the phenomenon, Tu and her co-authors ran five studies with more than 2,300 people. Some experiments asked participants to think about past work situations and then assessed their sense of power, [paranoia](link) and behavior. Another study, conducted over two weeks, looked at employees in an actual organization and measured how their feelings of power each day affected their level of paranoia and their work and home lives.

Their results showed paranoia increased as people felt less power at work.

In addition, paranoid individuals were more likely to engage in mild forms of aggression, like being unpleasant or critical toward a co-worker, complaining about work tasks and purposely wasting company

resources. Some even took their aggression home, getting angry with a family member or spouse.

"Paranoia can cause people to interpret benign interactions—a colleague not saying hello in the hallway—as hostile or offensive," Tu says. "Even without any interaction at all, some people may worry others are talking behind their back or conspiring against them."

The researchers discovered, however, two factors that counteracted feelings of low power: socioeconomic status and workplace culture. Individuals with higher socioeconomic status, and those who felt supported by their company and manager, were less likely to experience paranoia than others with similar levels of power.

"Feeling powerless and vulnerable is common and often motivated by subtle experiences," Tu says. "That's why it's especially important for leaders to create a supportive work environment, by allocating resources and offering promotions fairly, strengthening supervisor-subordinate relationships, disincentivizing self-serving behaviors, and removing job stressors."

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