People with Power are Better Liars

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People lie frequently and for many different kinds of reasons, including to protect feelings, claim undue resources, project a false self-image, or to be malicious. But lying does not come without cost. Ordinary lie-tellers experience negative emotions, decrements in mental function, and physiological stress. Liars are also at risk of getting caught. Despite people's best attempts to get away with their prevarications, lies are often behaviorally "leaked" through subtle changes in body movement and speech rate. Power, it seems, enhances the same emotional, cognitive, and physiological systems that lie-telling depletes. People with power enjoy positive emotions, increases in cognitive function (4-5), and physiological resilience such as lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol (6-7). Thus, holding power over others might make it easier for people to tell lies.

We investigated the effects of power on lie-telling with a sample of 47 volunteers in a 2 (high power vs. low power) x 2 (lie-telling vs. truth-telling) between-subjects design. Informed consent was obtained after the nature and possible consequences of the studies were explained. Power was experimentally manipulated using a naturalistic role-playing exercise. Participants were assigned to the role of "leader" or "subordinate" and engaged in a series social interactions in which the leader had control over the subordinate's monetary and social outcomes (9). A manipulation check of the power endowment confirmed that "leaders" felt more powerful

(dominant, in control, in charge, high status, like a leader, powerful; M = 2.89; SE = .16) than "subordinates" (M = 2.34; SE = .17), $F(1, 46) = 5.76$, $p < .05$.

Following the power manipulation, we manipulated lie-telling versus truth-telling using a high stakes theft paradigm (8). Individuals were asked to find $100 hidden in a nearby bookcase. Half of the volunteers were instructed by a computer to steal the $100. The other half were instructed to put the money back (participants were assured—and believed—that the experimenter did not know whether they were assigned to steal or not steal). All individuals were instructed to convince the experimenter that they did not take the money. If the individual could successfully convince the experimenter (regardless of whether they were lying) they could keep the $100 in cash. All participants were then interviewed about whether they had stolen the money: half were lying and half were telling the truth. The interviewer (blind to experimental condition) asked all participants the same critical questions (e.g., "Did you steal the $100?"; "Why should I believe you?"). After the interview, participants completed measures of moral emotional feelings (rated emotion terms: bashful, guilty, troubled, scornful) and a computerized task assessing degree of cognitive impairment. All participants provided saliva samples before and after the experiment to assess changes in the stress hormone cortisol (9). The interviews were videotaped and coded for two, classic nonverbal markers of deception: one-sided shoulder shrugs and accelerated prosody (9).

Low-power individuals showed the expected emotional, cognitive, physiological, and behavioral signs of deception; in contrast, powerful people demonstrated no evidence of lying across emotion, cognition, physiology, or behavior (see Figure). In other words, power acted as a buffer allowing the powerful to lie significantly more easily (less disturbing emotion, less cognitive impairment, less of a rise in the stress hormone cortisol) and more effectively (fewer

nonverbal cues associated with lying). Only low-power individuals felt badly after lying (panel A), suffered cognitive impairment (panel B), spiked in levels of the stress hormone cortisol (panel C), and demonstrated nonverbal “leakage” (more one-sided shoulder shrugs and accelerated prosody; panel D). (9)

Our results suggest that powerful people can leverage the emotional and cognitive benefits of their power to lie more easily and effectively. Power thwarts the emotional anguish, cognitive taxation, physiological stress, and nonverbal “tells” of lying.

References and Notes

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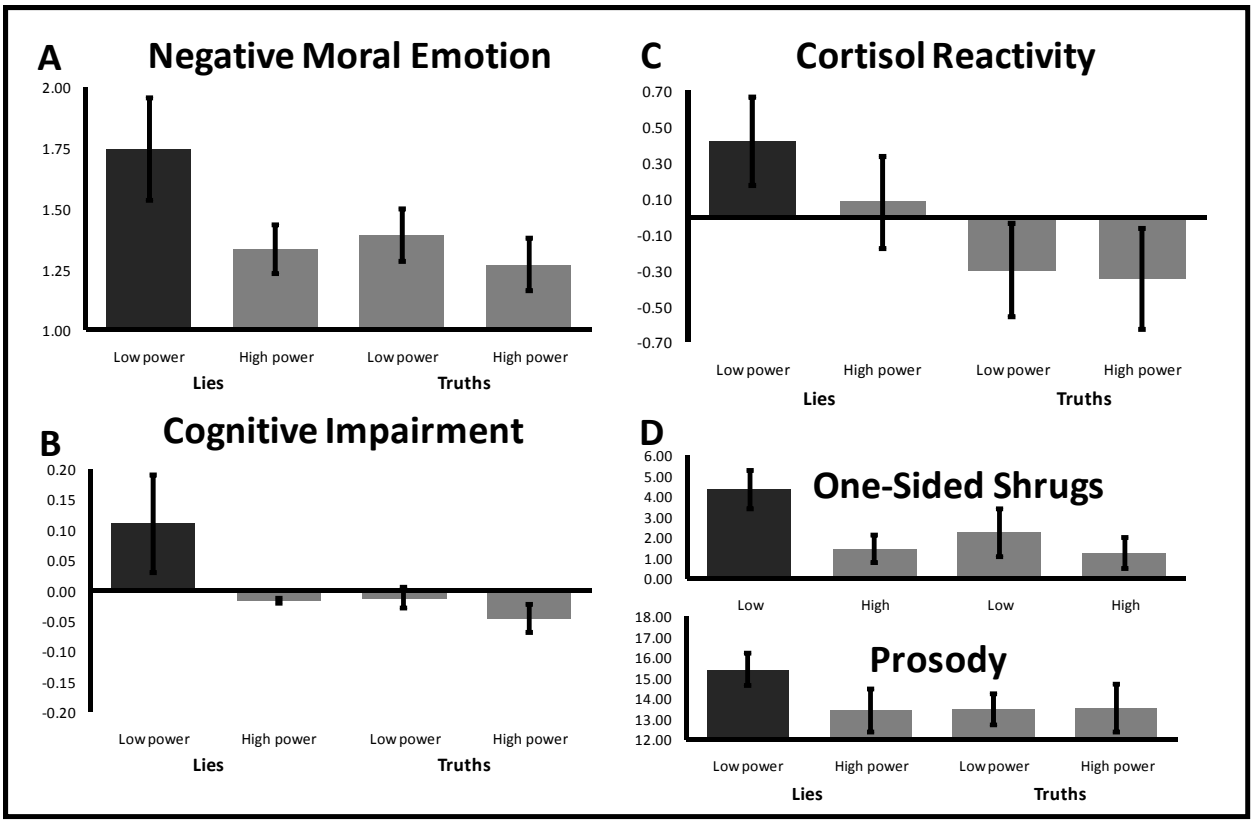
9. Details on methods and analysis can be found in the Supporting Online Material.

Figure. *Higher numbers indicate more of each outcomes variable (more: negative emotion, cognitive impairment, cortisol reactivity, higher frequency of shoulder shrugs, and faster speech rate). Error bars represent standard errors.*


A
Negative Moral Emotion
2.00
1.75
1.50
1.25
1.00
Low power
High power
Low power
High power
Lies
Truths
C
Cortisol Reactivity
0.70
0.50
0.30
0.10
-0.10
-0.30
-0.50
-0.70
Low power
High power
Low power
High power
Lies
Truths
B
Cognitive Impairment
0.20
0.15
0.10
0.05
0.00
-0.05
-0.10
-0.15
-0.20
Low power
High power
Low power
High power
Lies
Truths
D
6.00
5.00
4.00
3.00
2.00
1.00
0.00
One-Sided Shrugs
Low
High
Low
High
18.00
17.00
16.00
15.00
14.00
13.00
12.00
Prosody
Low power
High power
Low power
High power
Lies
Truths