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The Higher They Are, the Harder They Fall

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Let's say the FBI hears a senior elected official on a tapped telephone line demanding kickbacks in exchange for favors and shaking down donors for campaign contributions in exchange for plum contracts.

Does it make a difference if the elected official is a governor, as is said to be the case with Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich? What if the wrongdoer were a mayor? What if it were the president?

In a rational world, the rank of an official who abuses the public trust should make no difference in how people view the crime. Logically speaking, equivalent crimes deserve equivalent levels of opprobrium and punishment.

There is convincing psychological evidence, however, that this is not what happens in white-collar scandals such as the one involving Blagojevich. Controlled experiments show that the status of the lawbreaker makes a huge difference in how we evaluate what happened.

The higher the status of the person, the more likely we are to arrive at the most negative conclusions and reach for the most severe punishments. When it comes to white-collar crime, there appears to be an inversion of the discrimination that lower-status groups often face when it comes to violent crime -- the people who stand on society's tallest pedestals face our most vindictive judgments.

"People tell themselves different stories about what happened based on the status of the person, so that clashes with the idea that we punish people for crimes regardless of who they are," said **Alison Fragale**, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. She recently completed a series of experiments that showed that people reach very different conclusions depending on whether a white-collar criminal has high or low status.

"We look at Blagojevich and make an assessment of what is going on," she added. "People ask themselves, 'What kind of person is this?' That is when your perceptions are activated."

Fragale's experiments, which she recently described in the journal Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, posed identical fictional scenarios to two groups of volunteers. Both involved a person who commits a crime, and both featured identical crimes. But one group of volunteers was told the criminal had a high status, while the others were told the criminal had a lower status.

One scenario featured two women in New York who had underpaid their income taxes and had been caught by the Internal Revenue Service. One was described as Elizabeth McAllister Wallace, a woman with "prominent social and political connections." The other was called Yolanda Ramirez, the daughter of Mexican immigrants. The volunteers concluded that the WASPish tax evader had broken the law deliberately but that the second-generation Mexican American had made an innocent mistake. They recommended a stricter punishment for the high-status woman.

In another experiment, Fragale described a new drug that had caused patient deaths. An investigation found that the clinical trial a pharmaceutical company had done on the drug was flawed, she told volunteers. To one group, Fragale said the trial had been designed by a junior scientist; to the other, she said it was a senior scientist. The single word change caused a significant difference in how the study volunteers perceived the situation. The senior scientist was seen as having deliberately designed a bad trial to win approval from the Food and Drug Administration to market a dangerous drug, whereas the junior scientist was seen as having made an innocent mistake.

The reason people draw harsh conclusions about high-status people is that very successful people are generally perceived to be selfish, Fragale said. When bad stuff happens, we fall back on this stereotype and assume that the high-status person deliberately cheated the system.

But doesn't the stereotype about self-interested, ambitious types make intuitive sense? Are people really wrong to conclude that a governor who breaks the law is a worse human being than a county commissioner who commits the same crime?

Fragale disagreed: Stereotypes are stereotypes, she said -- even when they harm the powerful.

"These stereotypes are no different than stereotypes about race, gender and ethnicity," she said. "They describe tendencies of groups, but they are over-applied to individuals. You can't classify these stereotypes as being more functional than others that are much more damaging."

None of this means that prosecutors should turn down the heat on Blagojevich. If anything, it suggests that society ought to be more vigilant about lawbreaking by lower-level officials.

"I am always interested in how the media portrays this, because the media are people, too, subject to the same psychological processes," Fragale said. "They think some news events are more credible than others and some explanations [of wrongdoing] are more credible."

One interesting question that springs from the experiments is whether public officials can do something to mitigate the bias against high-status people. In a series of experiments yet to be published, Fragale and her colleague, organizational behavior professor Ben Rosen, asked volunteers to evaluate the culpability of former New York governor Eliot Spitzer, who resigned this year over a sex scandal. The psychologists had volunteers read excerpts from Spitzer's public apology, published in the format of a news report. One group also saw a photo of Spitzer's wife standing by him, as she did in real life. For another group, the psychologists digitally altered the photo to replace Spitzer's wife with Oprah Winfrey.

"We wondered if there is a halo effect that comes from your friends," Rosen said. "If you have powerful friends who stand up for you, does that help you?"

Sure enough, the study participants warmed to Spitzer when he was shown with Winfrey by his side. Effectively, the psychologists said, the endorsement of a highly regarded woman such as Winfrey, widely perceived to look out for the interests of others, allowed the participants to break the link they had unconsciously formed between Spitzer's status and selfishness. Winfrey's digitally reconstructed presence convinced many that the governor was a human being who had made a mistake -- and deserved forgiveness.

The road ahead for Blagojevich seems clear: Winfrey lives in Chicago, too.

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