

## PROBLEM SOLVING

**How exhaustion affects our moral compass***Monday, June 6, 2011***SUSAN PINKER**

When it comes to men behaving badly, the usual explanations range from the bad-apple theory to the whole-barrel-is-rotten, to power corrupts. But has it occurred to anyone that gossip generators such as Dominique Strauss-Kahn or Arnold Schwarzenegger may have lost their moral bearings because of something as common as cognitive fatigue?

That's what new research suggests, and the evidence is persuasive.

Francesca Gino, a behavioural economist at the Harvard Business School and lead author of the study, put the idea to the test by asking about 100 people at a time to sustain their attention for extended periods under difficult conditions. The idea was to mimic the demands of a typical high-powered workday.

"You resist temptation, you resist temptation – first the muffin at breakfast, then Facebook and YouTube – and at some point you can't do it any more," explains Duke University behavioural economist, Dan Ariely, a co-author of the study. "If you've been battling temptation for a while, you're basically less able to stay honest."

Admittedly, trying to avoid muffins and YouTube are low-level examples of the types of cognitive demands facing top dogs. Still, exhaustion of one's "moral muscle" can create a state of depletion, leaving you more susceptible to impulse, Prof. Ariely said.

"When you're depleted, the short term overwhelms your long-term goals. You focus on the here-and-now," he said.

To test the notion that cognitive depletion can leave us more vulnerable to committing unethical acts, the research team designed several tasks requiring people to exert strict self-control for long periods. Later, the subjects were given the opportunity to cheat.

In one experiment, for example, subjects had to avoid looking at distracting stimuli flashing at the bottom of a computer screen while they were watching an instructional video. In another, they had to write a short essay without using common letters, such as A or N. In a third, they had to name the font colour of letters spelling out the name of one colour, but printed in another colour (e.g., they had to say "red" when reading the word "green," printed in red ink).

Immediately afterward, when the subjects' attention and self-control were "depleted," they were given another test in which they had to self-report how many items they got right. They were paid per correct item, based on the honour system. But the researchers could monitor their true performance, and could measure the results against control subjects who had performed less demanding tasks.

So what happens if people exhaust their self-control by being vigilant for long periods, and are then tempted to break the rules? Once the pressure is off, will they behave as honestly as people who are not cognitively fatigued? Or will they become more apt to misrepresent their work, and take more pay than they earned?

The answer is they're more than twice as likely to cheat.

"Here we have good evidence about the psychological mechanisms: When we are depleted we cannot recognize that we are facing a situation that requires morality," said Prof. Gino. What's worse, added Prof. Ariely, is that people in this state may not realize it. Instead of avoiding trouble when they're tired, they're more likely to gravitate toward it.

There are a few Honest Abes out there, though. The researchers assessed participants' sense of "moral identity" and discovered a range of individual differences. "People who deeply care about being moral tend not to show this effect," said Prof. Gino.

Still, given that these moral folks are the exceptions and that "we live our lives in ways that are depleting, these results raise a red flag," she added. "Finding ways to restore self-control is a good idea before engaging in tasks that have a moral component, such as giving feedback, filling out an expense report, or evaluating employees."

What does all this have to do with malfeasance on a grand scale? It takes moxie and persistence to get to the top, and punishing hours and self-denial to stay there. If, as Prof. Gino points out, "it's clear that cognitively depleting tasks can lead us to cross ethical boundaries," then unrelenting daily demands may weaken some leaders' long-term moral commitments.

And those of us standing at the sidelines, tsk-tsking and wagging our fingers, are at risk of moral lapses, too.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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