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Natalia KARELAIA
Steffen KECK
2011/12/DS
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Natalia Karelaia *

Steffen Keck **

January 11, 2011

* Assistant Professor of Decision Sciences at INSEAD, Boulevard de Constance 77305 Fontainebleau Cedex Ph: 33 (0)1 60 72 45 11 Fax: 33 (0)1 60 74 55 00 Email: natalia.karelaia@insead.edu

** PhD Candidate in Decision Sciences at INSEAD, Boulevard de Constance 77305 Fontainebleau Cedex Ph: 33 (0)1 60 72 91 17 Fax: 33 (0)1 60 74 55 00 Email: steffen.keck@insead.edu

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Abstract

Evaluations of workplace deviant behavior are often biased by the personal characteristics of both deviants and sanctioners. In this paper, we focus on the characteristics of deviants and investigate the conditions under which sanctioners are more lenient towards deviants of high social status than low-status wrongdoers. We experimentally test the hypothesis that the severity of misbehavior determines the strength of punishment recommended for high-as compared to low-status wrongdoers (Studies 1 and 2). Results supported the hypothesized interactive effect of severity and deviant status on recommended punishments. For work-related transgressions of low severity, high status “shields” the deviant from harsh evaluations and sanctions. However, for transgressions of high severity, this effect reverses and social status becomes a liability. Sanctions are in fact the strongest for high-status perpetrators committing serious work-related transgressions. The liability effect of status in such cases is mediated by the perceived betrayal of the implicit social exchange between the organization and the status-holder (Study 3). The perceived betrayal reaches its highest level for highstatus actors engaged in serious workplace misbehaviors, thereby increasing the sanctioner’s disapproval and recommended punishment.

181 words.

Keywords: Workplace deviance; social status; Transgression; Punishment; Severity; Betrayal.
Deviant workplace behavior -- that is, behavior that violates organizational norms, is a widespread phenomenon and a significant problem for organizations (e.g., McGurn, 1998). Withholding effort, using working time for personal purposes, stealing, personal aggressions – either verbal or physical – towards co-workers are some example of workplace deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2003). Media across the globe regularly reports cases of major and minor thefts at the workplace, severe or mild harassments of co-workers or subordinates. The actors in these cases range from lower-level employees to the highest-level managers and presidents of organizations.

Evaluations of deviant behavior are fundamentally subjective and are prone to be biased by the personal characteristics of transgressors and evaluators such as, for example, their social status (Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Onypchuk, 2009; Bowles & Gelfand, 2010) or group membership (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988; Kerr, Hymes, Anderson, & Weathers, 1995). Most organizations are built as extensive hierarchies ranging from top management to low-level employees, and rule-violations can to occur at all levels. It is therefore likely that in many cases evaluations of transgressions and resulting sanctions are influenced by considerations related to transgressor status. In practice, subjective evaluations by superiors and peers are often the sole basis of sanctions imposed on transgressing individuals. Thus, it is important to identify and understand potential biases in the process of assessment of deviant behavior that might lead to unfair (either too lenient or too harsh) treatment of transgressors.

In this paper, we experimentally test the hypothesis that the severity of misbehavior determines the strength of punishment recommended for high- as compared to low-status wrongdoers. We focus on the characteristics of deviants and explore how the social status of deviants affects the evaluation of their behavior by potential sanctioners. Our main contribution to the existing literature on workplace deviance is to investigate the severity of
misbehavior as a crucial moderating factor. We suggest that for work-related transgressions of a relatively low severity high social status “shields” the actor from harsh evaluations and sanctions. By contrast, when transgressions are rather severe, this effect reverses and social status becomes a liability, thereby triggering stronger disapproval and recommended punishment. We demonstrate this interactive effect of social status and the severity of workplace deviance in Studies 1 and 2. Study 3 replicates these results and considers perceived appropriateness and betrayal as potential mediators of the effect of status on punishment. Our results show that in the case of severe misdeeds, the liability effect of status is mediated by the perceived betrayal of implicit social exchange.

**Shield effects of social status**

Classical research in sociology argues that for the same transgression, actors of a relatively lower social status -- such as social outsiders (Becker, 1963), women (Schur, 1983), or African Americans (Thomson & Zingraff, 1981) -- are evaluated more harshly than high-status actors (see also, Hollander, 1958). Recently, Bowles and Gelfand (2010) showed that the social status of evaluators is an important moderating variable. In their study, individuals primed with the psychological experience of high status judged high-status deviants less harshly than low-status deviants for the same rule violation. This result is consistent with the idea that the similarity between the perpetrator and the evaluator plays an important role in evaluations of workplace misbehavior (Kerr et al., 1995). However, individuals primed with a low-status experience did not discriminate between low- and high-status perpetrators. Overall, Bowles and Gelfand’s (2010) results are consistent with the classical sociological perspective, as overall high status actors were evaluated less harshly in these studies. The authors interpret their findings as “additional evidence that biases in the evaluation of workplace deviance
reinforce the social hierarchy by granting more lenience to those of higher status,” the evaluator status being an important moderating factor.

Hollander (1958) proposed one explanation for the preferential treatment of high-status deviants. In his view, a high position in the social hierarchy gives an individual an amount of goodwill granted by other members of the group or society in general -- labeled “idiosyncrasy credit.” This idiosyncrasy credit provides a certain level of freedom to engage in deviant behavior, and can be viewed as sort of hypothetical “bank account.” High-status actors build up this account by their perceived contributions to the social system and later debit this account when manifesting the idiosyncrasy in their behavior. Therefore, acts that are considered deviant and thus sanctioned when committed by low-status individuals might be considered more appropriate when carried out by an individual protected by her “idiosyncrasy credit.” As a consequence of this higher lenience, over time observers are likely to form different expectations about what constitutes appropriate behavior for high- and low-status individuals.

Consistent with this idea, Giordano (1983) suggested that observers might perceive deviant acts by high-status individuals as more normal, widespread, or even normative, and that is likely to have a direct effect on the severity of potential sanctions. Moreover, when a transgression is perceived as a widespread behavior, it no longer allows the observer to draw inferences about the character of the actor because she just behaves according to the expectations applied to high-status individuals. As a consequence, observers are more reluctant to sanction harshly the deviant person. In summary, high status protects an individual from harsh sanctions for a wrongdoing by making the wrongdoing seen as more appropriate, widespread, and in line with the expectations towards high-status actors.

However, the idiosyncrasy credit can be exhausted quickly by repeated or severe deviant acts (Hollander, 1958). In the case of severe transgressions, high status might offer
only a weak protection, as observers are unlikely to perceive these transgressions as appropriate even for high-status actors. Moreover, in the case of severe transgressions, attributions about the transgressor’s bad character can be made more easily, independent of whether this particular behavior is widespread. By itself this argument already predicts a moderating effect of transgression severity but only to the extent that high status will no longer “shield” the individual from sanctions. We further suggest that in the case of severe transgressions high status might even become a liability.

**Status as a liability**

Although lenience towards high-status actors is the most common finding, a number of studies reported the opposite effect suggesting that high-status actors are sometimes judged harsher than low-status deviants. For example, Hamilton and Saunders (1981) found that deviants that held a position superior than the victim of the wrongdoing were considered more responsible for the misbehavior and evaluated harsher. This result suggests that individuals in high hierarchical positions are held responsible according to a stricter interpretation of the same set of rules than individuals in lower positions. Wheeler, Weisburd, and Boden (1982) provided similar evidence from outside the laboratory. They showed that federal courts conferred harsher punishments (i.e., incarceration was more likely) for white collar-crimes to perpetrators of high socioeconomic status than to those of a relatively lower status.

Wiggins, Dill, and Schwartz (1965) considered the likelihood of future success of a group as a moderating factor that determines the sanctions the group imposes on deviant group members. The authors experimentally manipulated the outcome of a transgression (cheating) ostensibly committed by a group member such that it either became impossible for the group to reach the goal of becoming the best-performing group or the transgression did not have a great effect on goal achievement. Their results showed that when goal achievement
was not threatened, high-status deviants were judged less harshly. However, when the group was prevented from achieving its goal, high-status deviants where evaluated more negatively than low-status deviants. As the authors suggest, in the latter case status became a “liability” rather than a “shield.”

Several studies explicitly considered the severity of transgressions as one of the factors that determine the sanctions imposed on high-status deviants. For example, Rosoff (1989) asked participants to assume the role of judges and consider two hypothetical criminal cases, one representing a very serious alleged crime (murder of a pregnant woman) and the other – a more moderate misbehavior (insurance overbilling). For each case, alleged perpetrators were described as either a surgeon (high status) or a dermatologist (low status) resulting in a 2X2 design. Results showed that for the severe crime, the high-status perpetrator was evaluated more harshly than the low-status perpetrator whereas the effect reversed for the moderate wrongdoing. However, the interpretation of this result is unclear since the descriptions of the cases left significant ambiguity about innocence of the accused individual for the high-severity crime but not for the low-severity misbehavior. Moreover, in this study, the severity of transgression was confounded with the professional relatedness.

To separate the effects of severity and professional relatedness, Skolnic and Shaw (1994) varied the status of the offender (professor vs. graduate student), crime severity (rape vs. insurance overbilling), and the professional relatedness of the crime (related to the offender's profession or not related). Results showed no interaction effect of status and crime severity but instead a significant interaction between status of the offender and the professional relatedness of the transgression. In particular, high-status individuals were judged more harshly for work-related crimes and more leniently for crimes unrelated to work. Skolnic and Shaw (1996) extended this study using a similar design and considering three severity levels of the same crime (physical assault resulting in either mild, moderate or severe
injuries of the victim). Again, their results showed no effects of crime severity but a significant interaction between status and work-relatedness of the crime.

One mechanism that can turn high status into a liability is based on intentionality attribution. Fragale et al. (2009) showed that when the intentionality behind wrongdoing (in their study, tax-evasion) is unclear, high-status individuals are more likely to be judged as having acted intentionally than low-status deviants. As a consequence, recommendations for punishments are more unforgiving for high-status perpetrators.

**Perceived betrayal of implicit social exchange**

In contrast to Fragale et al. (2009) (as well as Rosoff, 1989, and Skolnick & Shaw, 1994; 1996), we focus on situations in which responsibility and intentionality of transgressions are unambiguous and thus intentionality attributions cannot explain the magnitude of recommended punishments. Instead, we suggest that transgressions by high-status individuals are perceived as betrayal of the group that conferred the status. We draw on Wahrman (1970) who proposed that the relationship between social groups and their high-status actors might be construed as an implicit exchange. The group confers high status upon an individual in exchange for which a higher than average adherence to social norms and rules is expected. For example, a higher than average norm compliance is probably expected from individuals who have been selected into the roles of Pope or a country president. A violation of these expectations can then be seen as a kind of trust violation or betrayal, which is likely to produce a strong resentment.

This argument is also in line with the idea that individuals are punished in proportion to the rewards they have received in the past (Wiggins et al., 1965). An individual who has been awarded more for her contributions to the group should be “fined” more for transgressions that are harming the group. Moreover, deviant behavior by high-status actors
might be particularly upsetting because such individuals are important symbols of the group and its values (Goode, 1978) -- which they betray by their misbehavior.

We suggest that the perceived betrayal of implicit social exchange is the highest when the high-status individual engages in deviant behavior of high severity. It will thus offset the shielding effect of high status. In the case of low-severity misbehavior, the sanctioner may also recognize violation of the implicit exchange of high status for a higher compliance with group norms. However, the sentiment of betrayal this misbehavior will trigger is likely to be milder than for high-severity misdeeds. Together with higher perceived appropriateness of minor wrongdoings committed by high-status actors, it will result in weaker disapproval of misbehavior.

To summarize, we hypothesize that perceived betrayal offsets the shielding effect of high status in the case of high-severity transgressions. When workplace deviance is of low severity, the perceived betrayal by the high-status deviant will be lower, the appropriateness of her behavior will be judged to be higher, and thus the prescribed punishment will be milder. We next detail our hypotheses regarding the effect of severity, perceived betrayal, and the appropriateness of misbehavior.

Hypotheses

The theoretical model, depicted in Figure 1, summarizes the previous discussion.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Drawing on previous research, we suggest that observers have more lenient expectations concerning the strict adherence to social norms towards high-status actors than low-status individuals. As a consequence, transgressions of low severity will be perceived as less inappropriate for high status actors. High-severity deviances are likely to be perceived as
strongly inappropriate even for high-status. As a result, the difference in perceived inappropriateness for high- and low-status actors will be smaller or, for extreme transgressions, disappear altogether.

_Hypothesis 1: Appropriateness_

a) _Transgressions of low severity are perceived as less inappropriate when they are committed by a high- than a low-status actor._

b) _Transgressions of high severity are perceived as equally inappropriate for high- and low status actors._

Transgressions by high-status actors are likely to be seen as betrayal of the implicit exchange between the high-status actor and the social group. It should be the case for both transgressions of low and high severity. However, transgressions of low severity are unlikely to be perceived as strong betrayals even for high-status actors and thus the overall effect of betrayal on punishments will be relatively low. In particular, the effect of betrayal will not be sufficient to offset the positive effect of lower perceived inappropriateness for high-status actors thereby resulting in a status shield effect. By contrast, in the case of severe misdeeds, perceived betrayal will high enough for high-status actors to result in a status liability effect.

_Hypothesis 2: Betrayal_

a) _Both low- and high-severity transgressions are perceived as a greater betrayal of the social group when they are committed by a high- than a low-status actor._

b) _Independently of deviant status, perceived betrayal is higher for transgressions of high- as compared to low- severity._

Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 together imply an interactive effect of status and transgression severity on recommended punishments.
Hypothesis 3: Punishment

a) For identical deviant behavior of low severity observers will recommend more lenient punishments for high- than low-status actors.

b) For identical deviant behavior of high severity observers will recommend harsher punishments for high- than low-status actors.

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to establish the interactive effect of transgression severity and status of the deviant on recommended punishment (Hypothesis 3).

Participants and design. We recruited 160 American adults via an online recruitment tool (Amazon Mechanical Turk) who filled in an online survey. Twenty-one participants were removed from the data pool for failing to respond the comprehension questions correctly or to pay close attention to “catch” questions. The results below are based on 139 valid responses (75 men and 64 women). We employed a 2 (transgressor status) X 2 (transgression severity) between-subject design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and completed the survey in nine minutes on average. Each participant received a compensation of $1.

Method. Participants were asked to assume the role of “HR consultants” and evaluate employees of a client company. Participants first read a description of a male employee (adapted from Bowles and Gelfand, 2010). The high-status scenario introduced David Rogers, “a well-regarded senior executive with a long track record of good performance.” He was said to be “the head of the sales department and in charge of over 100 employees.” His position in the organization was described as giving him “great authority to make independent decisions”

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1 Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis (2010) discussed the demographic characteristics of Mechanical Turk (MT) workers and conclude that the US workers on MT are at least as representative of the US population as traditional university subject pools. Moreover, they also demonstrated that results obtained in MT do not substantially differ from results obtained in a lab at a large Midwestern US university.
and placing him in the upper end of the organizational hierarchy. The low-status scenario introduced Dave Rogers, “a not well-known staff assistant with little track record.” He was said “to work in the sales department and have no formal authority over other employees.” His position in the organization was described as “giving him very little authority to make independent decisions” and placing him in the lower end of the hierarchy.

Participants then answered questions that tested their understanding of the scenario and rated the social status of the target character (on a scale from 1 to 7). Subsequently, participants were asked to evaluate sequentially four hypothetical transgressions (all of either high or low severity). The four transgressions were presented in random order. Participants were asked to assume that each transgression was the only negative information they had about the target character. For each transgression, participants rated the seriousness of misbehavior and the severity of recommended punishment (on scales from 1 to 10). Both low- and high-severity transgressions were adapted from Robinson and Bennett (1995) who categorized the instances of workplace deviant behaviour based on their perceived severity (minor vs. serious) and whether the main victim of misbehaviour is an individual or the organization as a whole (interpersonal vs. organizational deviance). Table 1 summarizes the eight transgression scenarios.

Results. Participants rated the status of the target character to be significantly higher in the high-status (M=6.52, SD=.54) than in the low-status (M=1.65, SD=1.03) condition (t(137)=−32.48, p<.001). The manipulation of severity was also successful: the average severity ratings across four scenarios were 6.18 in the low-severity condition, and 7.75 in the high-severity condition (t(137)=−5.76, p<.001).

To test the significance of the transgressor status x severity interaction, we combined punishment ratings over all four transgressions by averaging them for each participant. An analysis of variance of punishment ratings showed a significant main effect of transgressions
severity, $F(1,135)=78.36$, $p<.001$), no main effect of transgressor status, $F(1,135)=1.17$, $p=.28$), and a significant transgressor status x severity interaction, $F(1,135)=16.25$, $p<.001$.

Table 1 shows punishment scores for all transgressions. The data further support our predictions concerning the interaction between transgression severity and status. For transgressions of low severity, high-status actors were punished less than low-status deviants (across four scenarios of low severity, M=4.61 vs. 5.99, SD=1.82 and 1.77, $t(66)=3.12$, $p=.003$). For high-severity transgressions, observers recommended stronger sanctions for high- than low-status deviants (across four scenarios of high severity, M=8.09 vs. 7.30, SD=1.06 and 1.46, $t(69)=-2.52$, $p=.01$).

One remarkable case in the low-severity condition is transgression No. 4 — “contradicting a superior”. First, it is the only deviance that constitutes a violation of the organizational hierarchy. Second, according to the typology of Robinson and Bennett (1995), it is just at the borderline between minor and serious rule violations. In our study, mean punishment ratings for this transgression (M=7.13) are close to the mean rating for high-severity transgressions (M=7.62). However, status still reduces disapproval ratings for this misbehavior. Moreover, excluding this transgression from the low-severity condition does not change the results.

**Discussion.** The results of Study 1 supported our prediction concerning the interaction between transgressor status and transgression severity. However, the design had several limitations. First, the scenarios in the low- and high-severity conditions were not directly comparable as they involved transgressions of different nature (e.g., “acting against the decision of a superior” vs. “over-reporting travel expenses”). Second, while we used the classification of Robinson and Bennett (1995) to select minor and serious workplace
misbehaviors, the second factor in their typology (i.e., interpersonal vs. organizational deviance) was not explicitly controlled for in our design. In particular, three transgressions in the low-severity condition were organizational (No. 1, 2, and 3), but only one transgression in the high-severity condition belonged to this group (No. 4). We address these limitations in Study 2.

**Study 2**

Study 2 was designed to address the limitations of Study 1 and replicate the result concerning the interactive effect of transgression severity and transgressor status on punishment judgments (Hypothesis 3).

**Participants and design.** One hundred eighty American adults were recruited from the same population as in Study 1 and were similarly remunerated. Thirty-four participants failed to answer correctly comprehension and “catch” questions and thus were removed from the data, resulting in a total of 146 participants with valid responses (75 men and 71 women). The experiment was a 2 (status) X 2 (severity) X 2 (transgression type) mixed design. Status and severity were manipulated between subjects. Transgression type was a within-subject factor. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four between-subject conditions and completed the survey in eleven minutes on average.

**Method.** The general setup and procedure was identical to Study 1 with the exception that each participant evaluated only two transgressions. Following the typology of Robinson & Bennett (1995), one transgression was interpersonal (low severity: “telling a somewhat racist joke”; high severity: “repeatedly making highly racist and offensive remarks”), and the second transgression was organizational (low severity: “accepting small gifts without causing damage”; high severity: “accepting large kickbacks causing considerable damage”). For each transgression, participants answered three questions concerning the appropriateness of
punishment actions to be taken by the company ("firing Mr. Rogers", "taking strong formal actions against Mr. Rogers", "punishing Mr. Rogers severely"). Participants answered all questions on a 10-point scale (from 1, not at all appropriate, to 10, extremely appropriate). We combined the three punishment ratings into a single measure of recommended punishment ($\alpha=.84$).

**Results.** Participants rated the employee as higher status in the high-status than in the low-status condition ($M=6.51$ vs. $M=1.47$, $SD=.53$ and .87, $t(144)=-41.73$, $p<.001$). Participants ranked behaviors described in the scenarios as more serious in the high- than the low-severity conditions (interpersonal transgression: $M=8.99$ vs. 7.01, $SD=1.32$ and 2.40, $t(144)=-6.21$, $p<.001$; organizational transgression: $M=8.71$ vs. 5.86, $SD=1.66$ and 2.48, $t(144)=-8.22$, $p<.001$).

The results provide further supporting evidence for the hypothesized interaction between transgressor status and transgression severity. A 2 (status) X 2 (severity) X 2 (transgression type) analysis of variance showed a significant main effect of transgression severity ($F(1,138)=80.59$, $p<.001$), a significant status x severity interaction ($F(1,138)=4.61$, $p<.05$), and a significant severity x transgression type interaction ($F(1,138)=8.60$, $p<.01$). No other effects were significant, ($Fs(1,138) < 1.28$).

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Insert Figures 2a and 2b about here
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Figures 2a and 2b summarize punishment recommendations by transgression severity and transgressor status for each violation type (interpersonal and organizational). As these Figures illustrate, for low-severity transgressions, evaluators again recommended stronger punishment for low- than high-status deviants. Consistent with the analysis of variance, the effect was statistically stronger for the organizational transgression ($M=6.00$ vs. 4.78, $SD=2.66$ and 2.48, $t(68)=1.99$, $p=.05$) than for the interpersonal transgression ($M=6.22$ vs.
5.69, SD=2.72 and 2.27, t(68)= 0.88, p=.38). For high-severity transgressions, recommended punishment was stronger for high-status actors than low-status actors. The direction of the effect was as hypothesized, although the difference between the low- and high-status conditions was not large (interpersonal transgression: M=8.36 vs. 7.98, SD=1.60 and 1.58, t(74)=-1.03, p=.30; organizational transgression: M=8.88 vs. 8.40, SD=1.29 and 1.94, t(74)=-1.25, p=.21).

Discussion. Similar to Study 1, Study 2 showed that transgression severity is an important factor that determines recommended punishment for high- vs. low-status deviants. High status has a shielding effect for low-severity transgressions, but the protective effect of status disappears when transgressions are of high severity. The effect holds for both interpersonal and organizational transgressions. In the next study, we investigate how perceived betrayal contributes to the disappearance of the shield effect of status. Moreover, we also address the question how the judged appropriateness of misbehavior varies with transgressor status and deviance severity and how it contributes to recommended punishments for workplace deviance.

Study 3
The goal of Study 3 was to replicate the interactive effect of status and severity (Hypothesis 3) and, most important, to test the predictions regarding the psychological mechanism behind this interaction. Specifically, we consider appropriateness and betrayal as mechanisms of shield and liability effects (Hypotheses 1 and 2).

Participants and design. One hundred sixty American adults were recruited and remunerated similarly as in Studies 1 and 2. Sixteen participants failed to answer correctly comprehension and “catch” questions and were removed from the data, resulting in a total of 144 participants (81 men and 63 women). The experiment was a 2 (status) X 2 (transgressions severity)
between-subject design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and took an average of nine minutes to complete the survey.

**Method.** The general setup and procedure was identical to Studies 1 and 2 with the exception that the manipulation check of perceived status of the character was included at the end of the survey, not in the beginning. Participants evaluated only one transgression -- “using expense account for private purposes.” The severity of the transgression was manipulated by changing the amount of money that was misused by the employee. The low-severity scenario introduced Mr. Rogers [Dave in low-status condition] who “intentionally violated the company regulations by using his expense account to pay for drinks with his friends at a bar.” He was said to have spent a total of $24 this way. The high-severity scenario suggested that Mr. Rogers [Dave] “intentionally violated the company regulations by repeatedly using his expense account to pay for private dinners with his friends in fancy restaurants and visits to bars” and that he spent a total of $480 this way.

We used the same measures as in Study 2 to assess punishment recommendations. In addition, we included four items to assess perceived appropriateness of the transgression (e.g., “For a person in his position Mr. Rogers’ (Dave’s) behavior is quite normal and appropriate.”) and four more questions to assess perceived betrayal (e.g., “Mr. Rogers (Dave) betrayed the trust the company placed in him.”). A description of all items can be found in the Appendix.

**Results.** Participants rated the status of the target character to be significantly higher in the high-status (M=6.20, SD=.71) than in the low-status condition (M=1.93, SD=1.25, t(142)= -24.32, p<.001). Participants ranked behaviors described in the scenarios as more serious in the high- than the low-severity conditions (M=8.25 vs. 5.36, SD=1.28 and 2.12, t(142)= -24.32, p<.001).

An analysis of variance of punishment recommendations showed no main effect of status (F(1,140)=0.45, p=.50), a significant main effect of severity (F(1,140)=74.86, p<.001),
Punishing high-status deviants

and a significant status x severity interaction (F(1,140)=7.40, p<.01). Figure 3 summarizes punishment recommendations across the four conditions. Once again, high status appeared to serve as a shield for the low-severity deviance, but was a liability for the high-severity misbehavior. For the low-severity deviance, punishment recommendations were stronger for the low- than the high-status actors (M=5.86 vs. 4.96, SD=1.70 and 1.99, t(65)=1.98, p=.05). For the high-severity misbehavior, the high-status actor was punished more than the low-status deviant (M=7.99 vs. 7.44, SD=0.88 and 1.42, t(75)=-1.83, p=.07).

An analysis of variance of appropriateness ratings revealed a significant main effect of status (F(1,140)=11.20, p<.01), a significant main effect of transgression severity (F(1,140)=5.17, p<.05), and no interaction effect of severity and status (F(1,140)=0.56, p=.46). Table 2 shows mean values for appropriateness and betrayal across the four conditions. Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, mild misbehavior was ranked more appropriate for the high-status actor than for the low-status actor (M=5.04 vs. 3.66, SD=2.00 and 1.99, t(65)=-2.83, p=.006). However, contrary to Hypothesis 1b, severe misbehavior was ranked more appropriate for the high-status actor than for the low-status actor (M=4.02 vs. 3.14, SD=1.90 and 2.01, t(75)=-1.88, p=.06). It is possible that the transgression in the high-severity condition was not serious enough in order to bring the (in)appropriateness judgments to the same level for the low- and the high-status actors. The fact that the difference between the low- and the high-status actors was weaker in the high-severity condition (p=.06 vs. p=.006 in the low-severity condition) provides collaborative evidence for Hypothesis 1b.

An analysis of variance of betrayal ratings showed a significant main effect of status (F(1,140)=27.64, p<.001), a significant main effect of transgression severity (F(1,140)=14.75, p<.001), and no interaction effect of severity and status (F(1,140)=1.60, p=.20). The results in
Table 2 show that betrayal was ranked as most serious in the high-severity scenario that involved the high-status actor (M=8.18 vs. 6.16 for the low-status actor, SD=1.15 and 2.00, t(75)=-4.87, p<.001). For mild misbehavior, the betrayal rankings were lower for both the high- and the low-status deviants (M=6.60 and 5.38, SD=1.99 and 1.76), consistent with Hypothesis 2b. However, the high-status actor again triggered stronger betrayal judgments (t(65)=-2.66, p=.01), as theorized in Hypothesis 2a.

We tested our theoretical predictions regarding the joint effect of betrayal and appropriateness on recommended punishment by fitting linear models of punishment ratings separately for the low- and the high-severity conditions. Tables 3a and 3b summarize the results of these models. In the low-severity case (Table 3a), status has a significant negative effect on punishments, and positively affects perceived appropriateness and betrayal (Models 1-3), all consistent with our predictions. As Model 5 shows, betrayal has an independent positive effect on punishment recommendations. At the same time, status still has a direct strongly negative effect in this model. Contrary to our predictions, perceived appropriateness does not appear to mediate the effect of status.

In the high-severity case (Table 3b), status has a (marginally) significant positive effect on punishment recommendations (Model 1), which is consistent with the predicted liability effect. Status also affects positively perceived appropriateness and betrayal (Models 2 and 3). As theorized, perceived betrayal fully explains the effect of status on punishment recommendations (Model 5). Perceived appropriateness does not have a significant effect on punishment.

**Discussion.** Study 3 again demonstrated a shield effect of status for mild misbehavior, and a liability effect of status for more serious misdeeds. In the case of mild misbehavior, the
deviant behavior was seen as more appropriate for high- than low-status actors, but was also interpreted as a more severe betrayal of the organization the higher status of the actor was. However, contrary to our theoretical model, the data showed that neither appropriateness nor betrayal mediate the protective effect of status. Further research is needed to understand why status provides protection against punishment for mild workplace deviance. For the case of severe deviant behavior, our results are consistent with our theoretical predictions whereby perceived betrayal is driving the harsher recommended punishments for high-status deviants.

**General Discussion**

Deviant behavior causes a lot of material loss and psychological distress to organizations and society in general. One way to diminish deviant behavior would be to impose formal sanctions on deviants. Another mechanism would involve social disapproval and condemnation of acts that violate organizational and societal rules (Grasmick & Green, 1980). Comparative feasibility and effectiveness of the two mechanisms is beyond the scope of this paper. However, an important factor that is common to both of them is how potential observers or sanctioners evaluate deviant behavior. Sociological evidence suggests that individuals rarely act as impartial evaluators and that the characteristics of deviants affect the severity with which their misbehavior is sanctioned and condemned. The focus of this study is one of such characteristics -- social status of deviants.

Prior work on the evaluation of deviant behavior has documented both cases when for same transgressions, high-status deviants are punished less than low-status transgressors (Becker, 1963; Bowles & Gelfand, 2010; Hollander, 1958; Schur, 1983), as well as cases when sanctioners condemn high-status deviants more than low-status actors (Fragale et al. 2009, Hamilton and Saunders, 1981; Wheeler et al., 1982). In this paper, we investigated the
role that transgression severity plays in the formation of sanction judgments and found that it is the factor that puts the two pieces of literature together.

Across three studies, we observed a consistent pattern of interactive effects of severity and deviant status on recommended punishments. For work-related transgressions of low severity, we found that high status “shields” the deviant from harsh evaluations and sanctions. For transgressions of high severity, the shielding effect disappears and social status eventually becomes a liability. Our results showed that the most severe punishment is imposed on deviants of high status committing serious workplace misdeeds. Taken together, these studies provide convincing evidence that high-status actors cannot avoid condemnation and disapproval when they engage in behavior that most people consider as a severe violation of social or organizational norms.

In addition to demonstrating the interactive effect of severity and deviant status, we tested potential mediators of the shield and the liability effects of status (Study 3). We found that the liability effect of status for serious misdeeds is mediated by the perceived betrayal of implicit social exchange between the organization and the status-holder. As for mild misdeeds, our data suggest that they are considered more appropriate for high-status actors. However, perceived appropriateness did not appear to mediate the effect of status on punishment in the case of mild misdeeds. Further research should investigate other potential mechanisms that would explain the shielding effect of status in such cases.

Previous studies suggested that high status becomes a liability when the intentionality behind wrongdoing is unclear (Fragale et al., 2009). For example, underreporting taxes can be either intentional or a consequence of a genuine mistake. When intentions are ambiguous, observers tend to attribute intentionality more to high-status individuals than low-status deviants. As a result, high-status individuals are punished more severely. This paper further contributes to the research on punishing high-status deviants by considering the situations
where intentionality and responsibility of transgressions are unambiguous. As we showed, perceived betrayal of social exchange, i.e., high status in exchange for a higher than average norm compliance (Wahrman, 1970), explains harsher punishment of high-status actors who are responsible for severe misbehaviors.

In the present studies, we manipulated social status of deviants by changing the description of their position in the social hierarchy (e.g., an executive vs. a staff assistant), their decision-making authority (e.g., “great authority to make independent decisions” vs. “little authority to make independent decisions”), and reputation (e.g., “a well-regarded individual” vs. “a not well-known individual with little track record”). Thus, the high-status character in our scenarios arguably benefited from both high status (i.e., social position) and a position of power (i.e., opportunity to influence others, control resources, rewards and punishments) – more than the low-status character (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Research on power and moral behavior showed that power increases the likelihood of practicing less strict moral behavior (Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010). Moral dilemmas addressed in this literature include cheating and legal offences, e.g., breaking traffic related norms and rules, manipulating tax declarations, keeping a stolen bike.

Our results suggest that the propensity of powerful and powerless to engage in questionable behavior might also depend on the perceived severity of potential misdeeds. We showed that when people who benefit from a position of power in organizations engage in severe misbehavior, observers express stronger disapproval and recommend harsher punishments than for powerless people committing the same misdeeds. If powerful anticipate this strong condemnation of severe misbehavior, they should be less likely to engage in severe transgressions. Further research should investigate how the propensity to engage in severe misbehavior compares for high- and low-power actors.
References


Tables and Figures

Table 1: Mean punishment ratings by transgression and transgressor status (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High Status</th>
<th>Low Status</th>
<th>Mean over high and low status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Severity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Mr. Rogers (Dave) was repeatedly late for meetings.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>5.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mr. Rogers (Dave) mailed personal letters using company stamps.</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>6.02</td>
<td>5.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mr. Rogers (Dave) made personal phone calls and wrote personal E-mails during his working hours.</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mr. Rogers (Dave) acted against the decision of a superior.</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>7.68</td>
<td>7.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>5.99</td>
<td>5.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **High Severity**      |             |            |                             |
| 1. Mr. Rogers (Dave) withheld important work-related information from other employees and superiors. | 7.21        | 5.40       | 6.14                        |
| 2. Mr. Rogers (Dave) sexually harassed a co-worker. | 9.48        | 8.83       | 9.10                        |
| 3. Mr. Rogers (Dave) verbally abused a co-worker. | 7.76        | 7.43       | 7.56                        |
| 4. Mr. Rogers (Dave) over reported his travel expenses in order to receive a higher reimbursement. | 7.93        | 7.52       | 7.69                        |
| **Mean**               | 8.09        | 7.30       | 7.62                        |

Table 2: Mean betrayal and appropriateness ratings (Study 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Appropriateness</th>
<th>Betrayal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Status</td>
<td>Low Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low severity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Severity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3a: Results from OLS regressions for low severity transgression (Study 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model No.</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Appropriateness</th>
<th>Betrayal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Punishment recom.</td>
<td>-0.90**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Betrayal</td>
<td>1.22***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>1.37***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Punishment recom.</td>
<td>-1.22**</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.39***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=67. High status was coded 1 and low status was coded 0. Entries in the columns are unstandardized regression coefficients.

* p < 0.1 ** p < 0.05. *** p < 0.01.

### Table 3b: Results from OLS regressions for high severity transgression (Study 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model No.</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Appropriateness</th>
<th>Betrayal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Punishment recom.</td>
<td>0.55*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Betrayal</td>
<td>2.01***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>0.87*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Punishment recom.</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.24***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=77. High status was coded 1 and low status was coded 0. Entries in the columns are unstandardized regression coefficients.

* p < 0.1 ** p < 0.05. *** p < 0.01.
Figure 1: Theoretical Model

**Low severity**
- High Status → + Perceived Appropriateness → - Punishment Recommendations → + Perceived Betrayal

**High severity**
- High Status → o Perceived Appropriateness → - Punishment Recommendations → + Perceived Betrayal

Note: “+” indicates a positive effect, “-” a negative effect and “o” indicates no effect.
**Figure 2a:** Mean punishment recommendations for interpersonal rule-violation (Study 2)

**Figure 2b:** Mean punishment recommendations for organizational rule-violation (Study 2)
Figure 3: Mean punishment recommendations (Study 3)
Appendix: Items used in Study 3.

All items were measured on a 1-10 scale (1=strongly agree, 10=strongly disagree)

**Appropriateness**
1. For a person in his position Mr. Rogers’ (Dave’s) behavior is quite normal and appropriate.
2. Mr. Rogers (Dave) is just doing what many other people in his position are doing.
3. It would be unfair to punish Mr. Rogers for something which most people in his position are doing.
4. It is to be expected from people in Mr. Rogers’ (Dave’s) position to do things like this.

**Betrayal**
1. Mr. Rogers (Dave) betrayed the trust the company placed in him.
2. Mr. Rogers’ (Dave’s) position gave him a special responsibility not to engage in this kind of behavior.
3. Mr. Rogers (Dave) disappointed the high expectations the company had of him.
4. Mr. Rogers (Dave) failed to live up to the great responsibility involved with his position in the organization.
Europe Campus
Boulevard de Constance
77305 Fontainebleau Cedex, France
Tel: +33 (0)1 60 72 40 00
Fax: +33 (0)1 60 74 55 00/01

Asia Campus
1 Ayer Rajah Avenue, Singapore 138676
Tel: +65 67 99 53 88
Fax: +65 67 99 53 99

Abu Dhabi Campus
Muroor Road - Street No 4
P.O. Box 48049
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
Tel: +971 2 651 5200
Fax: +971 2 443 9461

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