Fall from grace: The role of dominance and prestige in the punishment of high status actors

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ABSTRACT

When actors transgress social norms, their social status colors the severity with which observers punish them. While some argue society judges high-status transgressors more harshly than they judge their low-status counterparts, others contend high-status transgressors receive the more lenient treatment in ambiguous transgressions. We reconcile this theoretical inconsistency, for we propose the ability of social status to color third party judgements of transgression and behavior towards the transgressor crucially depends on the status strategy with which high-status actors operate. Drawing on evolutionary theories of dominance and prestige as two viable means of preserving status within social hierarchies, we contend third parties penalize actors who exert and maintain their status via dominance more vehemently than they penalize actors who wield status via prestige. Across multiple studies that spanned archival field data, controlled lab experiments, and employed different instantiations of dominance, prestige, and misconduct, we consistently demonstrate others punish dominant high-status actors more gravely than prestige based high-status actors. Furthermore, we find intentionality attributions and lack of moral credentials explain harsher punishment meted out to dominant compared to prestige based high-status actors. Collectively, these findings provide both a parsimonious reconciliation of inconsistency in the extant literature and a theoretical understanding of how nuanced status strategies of high-status actors differentially affects judgement, decisions and behaviors of third party others.

Keywords: social status, punishment, transgression, moral credentials, and deviance
Our social landscape remains dotted with individuals severely reprimanded for norm and moral violations, while others prove excused for similar misdeeds. For instance, consider the differential fate meted out to Bill Cosby and Mike Tyson—two individuals once perched at the top of their respective domains. Cosby crowned the entertainment industry apex while Tyson dominated athletes who entered the boxing ring. At the peak of their careers, both stood accused of sexual assault. For Tyson, the fall from grace proved swift and severe, both in the eyes of the law, experts, and fans of the sport (Mitchell, 1992). Particularly, the courts sentenced him to six years in federal prison (Muscatine, 1992). In stark contrast, initial reports of Cosby’s alleged sexual assaults were perceived as improbable (Errico, 2005). Despite a string of accusers coming to light (Woolf, 2014), the legal case initially ended in a mistrial (Gersen, 2017). Finally, under an unprecedented global social movement against sexual harassment, a retrial determined Cosby guilty in one out of the 50 plus allegations (McCarthy, 2018). Parallels to this prove to abound in the corporate world. In 2008, the court sentenced Sam Israel III, hedge fund manager at Bayou Hedge Fund to 20 years in prison for defrauding investors of over $450 million (Weidlich & Glovin, 2008). In contrast, what stands now as one of the largest fraudulent acts in corporate history, three Olympus executives who conspired to obscure $1.5 billion in investment losses, successfully avoided jail time (Tabuchi, 2013).

In the understudied examples, the transgressors shared similar status characteristics—they enjoyed a rank at their field’s zenith; thus, the standing society bestowed upon them provided them with the distinct ability to influence others. Ironically, third parties punished some high-status actors more harshly for their alleged ethical violations while they pardoned others. How is it possible that observers evaluate similar acts of transgression from equally high-status actors differently? Extant research across sociology, psychology, and management provides insights as
to why a transgressor’s status may color observers’ judgments and the punishment they exercise on these transgressors (Bowles & Gelfand, 2009; Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009; Giordano, 1983; Graffin, Bundy, Porac, Wade, & Quinn, 2013; Karelaia & Keck, 2013; Loeffler & Lawson, 2002; Polman, Pettit, & Wiesenfeld, 2013; Rosoff, 1989; Swigert & Farrell, 1977). Although this extensive work demonstrates successfully the critical role of transgressor’s status in influencing observers’ punishment, it also unveiled contradictory findings. While some discovered individual status results in greater punishment for high-status actors for ambiguous transgressions, others unmasked elevated-status buffers the impact of others’ condemnation for similar misbehaviors (see Fragale et al., 2009; Polman et al., 2013, as one such example). Thus, the prevailing work fails to elucidate why society reprimands some high-status actors for their infractions while they pardon other high-status actors. Our work addresses this lack of comprehensive theoretical understanding within the empirical literature.

We build on the evolutionary theory of status among humans, that postulates individuals can attain or maintain status via two routes: dominance or prestige (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Maner & Case, 2016). An individual who displays assertiveness, decisiveness, and controlling behavior toward others exudes dominance. When a dominant person portrays such self-assured and confident demeanor, observers interpret the forceful characteristics as a signal of augmented competence, which elevates the actor to a higher status (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Individuals associated with prestige garner respect and admiration because of their willingness to share their knowledge and skills with others (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). The assisted people in exchange for such generosity uplift these individuals to high status positions (Flynn, 2003). As a result, both dominance and prestige typify viable pathways to both the attainment and maintenance of status (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013). We argue the status type
associated with an individual—dominance or prestige —determines whether an observer
chastises a high-status actor for a transgression. Building on third-party attribution theories
(Malle & Knobe, 1997; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004), we suggest the actor’s status type jades third
party’s attribution of high-status actor’s agency involved in the transgression, which then
explains the harsher punishment directed towards such actors.

Our research offers several important contributions. Primarily, we provide a theoretically
grounded rationale for the inconsistent findings in extant organizational research illustrating why
society sometimes punishes high-status actors for vague wrongdoings while at other times it
excuses others. Second, in resolving this theoretical tension, we forward a more nuanced and
parsimonious account highlighting the two different strategies through which status yields its
benefits and associated costs. Third, our findings advance the literature on retributive justice by
highlighting that the status currency with which focal actors operate can influence our attribution
of intentionality for their alleged transgressions, which then determines our inherent desire to
punish them. Finally, our research also contributes to the existing literature on organizational
reputation following misconduct by a key organizational member(s) (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Status, attributions of wrongdoing and punishment

Status is broadly defined as the social rank within a formal or informal hierarchy or a
person’s relative standing along a valued social dimension (Báles, Strodteck, Mills, &
Roseborough, 1951; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Pettit, Sivanathan, Gladstone, & Marr, 2013). A
high-status individual by virtue of ability or knowledge drives the group to attain its goals
(Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972). Consequently, individuals with higher status enjoy greater
dereference from, as well as influence over, persons who remain positioned lower in the social
hierarchy (Anderson & Brown, 2010). In other words, status reflects a property that rests in the eyes of others and is conferred to individuals who hold a higher rank or social standing in a pecking order based on mutually valued set of social attributes (Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

Higher social status grants a host of tangible benefits in both professional and personal life. For instance, groups seek high-status individuals to obtain advice when solving problems or making important decisions (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). Therefore, high status yields higher pay (Wade, Porac, Pollock, & Graffin, 2006), promotes unsolicited help (Van der Vegt, Bunderson, & Oosterhof, 2006), and garners disproportionately augmented credit for efforts on joint tasks (Merton, 1968) and expressed ideas aimed at improving the current working environment (Howell, Harrison, Burris, & Detert, 2015). Not surprisingly, venerated actors report higher scores on various health indicators and measures of general well-being (Stansfield & Marmot, 1992). In short, our social ecosystem rewards individuals possessing high status a significant cumulative advantage over time, a phenomenon commonly known in sociology as *The Matthew effect* (Merton, 1968).

In addition to the societally derived benefits, high status protects actors from repercussions for transgressing social norms. Specifically, Hollander (1958) affirmed elevated status grants its owner idiosyncratic credits. He argued the *positively disposed impressions* residing in the eyes of others, affords individuals enjoying high status the ability to escape sanctions when they deviate from expected norms. However, the empirical tests of this proposition remain inconclusive. Fragale and colleagues (2009) asserted high-status actors experienced harsher punishment for ambiguous transgressions (i.e. instance when an actor’s motives for the norm violation stood unclear or attributable to an honest mistake). Despite the transgression’s ambiguity, high-status actors encountered increased accountability for the
misdeed. Such attributions of intentionality explained harsher comeuppance advocated for high-status actors. In short, instead of representing an asset, increased status served a liability for such actors. Similarly, Giordano (1983) maintained high-status actors confront greater sanctions for even small deviant acts, for others held them more accountable for their actions. Indeed, CEOs winning Financial World’s annual “CEO of the Year” competition suffered a greater loss in their salary following unsatisfactory firm performance than CEOs not bestowed the award (Wade et al., 2006). Similarly, high-status British parliamentarians endured greater accountability and retribution than lower-status legislators for the same offense (Graffin et al., 2013). Apart from demonstrating stricter criticisms against venerated British parliamentarians, Graffin and colleagues (2013) also reported high-status CEOs suffered increased negative consequences, which lead to greater instances of their downfall than lower-status CEOs.

In contrast, Polman and colleagues (2013) revealed highly esteemed actors experienced less castigatory action than their subordinate counterparts when their involvement in transgression proved doubtful—a set of results contrary to the aforementioned but in line with Hollander’s assertion (1958). Correspondingly, individuals associated with exalted occupational status suffer reduced disciplinary sanctions for an indeterminate moderate-level offense, and society expected them to attenuate transgressions in the future compared to individuals with low occupational status (Loeffler & Lawson, 2002; Rosoff, 1989). An archival study of court sentencing found that for similar crimes, individuals with elevated social status received diminished punishment and courts granted bail more prevalently, accepted guilty pleas, and doled out more lenient convictions than individuals with lower status (Swigert & Farrell, 1977). The juvenile correctional system replicated a similar pattern of results (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Further, an extensive meta-analysis examining jury decision-making uncovered jurors rendered
fewer guilty verdicts to individuals associated with higher socioeconomic means compared to socioeconomically disadvantaged defendants (Devine & Caughlin, 2014). In short, there is also ample empirical evidence to suggest that high-status actors mitigate punishment more than their low-status counterparts avoid repercussions, especially when the transgression appears ambiguous.

Collectively, the literature to date remains inconclusive and contradictory with respect to the sanctions handed out to high-status actors following vague transgressions or norm violations. Consistent with prior research, we define ambiguous transgressions as a norm violation behavior that seems to benefit the actor. However, the behavior lacks the clarity whether the actor meant to behave in that manner or if the behavior was unintentional, particularly, an honest mistake due to an actor’s lack of knowledge (Effron & Monin, 2010; Polman et al., 2013; van Prooijen, 2006). Thus, when evaluating ambiguous transgressions, at times high status benefits the transgressor, affording the person an overly optimistic evaluation of their misdeeds. Contrariwise, at other times elevated status hurts the transgressor, inviting a more critical and harsher assessment of the wrongdoing. In this research, we, therefore, explore a theoretically grounded explanation for the inconsistent findings in the prevailing literature. Specifically, we examine both when and why high-status actors receive less versus more punitive actions following ambiguous norm violations. In line with our phenomenon of interest, we focus our inquiry on high-status actors’ range of dubious transgressions that appear to advantage the high-status actor. Although the nature of the offense is not of primary interest, we delve into its potential moderating effect in the general discussion section. Examining the manner through which actors perceptually maintain their status, we reconcile the theoretical and empirical inconsistencies in past findings. Contrary to the dominant trends in the literature that focused on
the differences in high versus low-status, we clarify observers’ interpretation of high-status actors’ misdeeds lies critically in whether the actor’s status within the social hierarchy is one based on dominance or prestige.

**Dominance and Prestige – Two Different Status Strategies**

Drawing on the evolutionary theory of social structures that enhance and maximize group members’ fitness, Henrich and Gil-White (2001) claim rank allocation in social hierarchies remain either based on dominance or prestige (Cheng et al., 2013; Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010; Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Livingston, 2012; Maner & Case, 2016). Group members, characterized as dominant, attain and maintain high rank when they demonstrate assertive, controlling, and intimidating behavior (Maner & Case, 2016). Such individuals keenly voice their opinions, command control of group decisions, and influence other outcomes in an attempt to gain superiority over others (Cheng et al., 2013). Masterful at forming and breaking alliances with other members, they forge instrumental relationships that generally promote the preservation of their elevated rank (Maner & Case, 2016). Given their confident demeanor and forceful behavior, group members perceive such individuals as competent to enforce coordinated and collective action, which increases group efficiency and performance (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Laustsen & Petersen, 2015). Due to positive outcomes resulting from effective coordination and reduced conflict among group members, group members exalt dominant individuals to a high status or leadership position. These dominant attributes hold value especially when faced with inter-group competition, threat, or uncertainty; circumstances that thrust dominant individuals into leadership positions (Halevy et al., 2012; Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017). Thus, invariably a high-status dominant actor proves a highly agentic member of the group, who exudes self-confidence, controlling, and decisive behavior (Maner & Case, 2016).
Often, dominance overlaps with power where one possesses asymmetric control over the resources and thus boasts the ability to influence others’ actions (Emerson, 1962). Crucially, dominance remains present with or without formal rank authority or control over valuable resources and can be observed among group members devoid of any institutional roles. Thus, dominance is conceptually distinct from formal power relationships (see Cheng et al. 2013 for more details).

In other hierarchies, group members confer higher status to individuals who they respect and admire for their skillset, knowledge, expertise, and their willingness to share these characteristics with others (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Maner & Case, 2016). Other members, who try to emulate admired actors to foment their success in the valued domain, seek high-status prestige based individuals to learn from their advanced knowledge and opinions. Transmission of such valuable social information enhances member fitness, for they can reliably depend upon the superior knowledge and skills of the respected individual and maximize their performance. Thus, these vastly competent and helpful leaders harness status in the form of admiration, respect, or recognition for their skills and collegiality (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Maner & Case, 2016). As a result, “prestige is determined by the perceiver and, as such, necessarily lies in the eyes of the beholder” (Maner & Case, 2016, p. 138). Since prestige-based status remains dependent on other’s deference and approval, it proves similar to the reputation construct discussed in sociological and macro literatures. Reputation is defined as “the extent to which organization is held in high esteem or regard” (Roberts & Dowling, 2002, p. 1078) or “the consumer’s subjective evaluation of the perceived quality of the producer” (Rhee & Haunschild, 2006, p.101). Reputation, therefore, typifies an expectation based on an intangible quality or other indiscernible traits that are generally difficult to quantify but hold immense value (Jensen & Roy,
2008; Podolny, 1993; Washington & Zajac, 2005). A typical example of a prestige based high-status leader demonstrates pertinent knowledge and freely offers sound advice to fellow coworkers in an organization, or, an emeritus professor well admired and respected among other faculty members and sought out for personal knowledge and expertise despite lacking institutional authority. Given the prevalence of both types of individuals in leadership positions, both dominance and prestige exemplify two viable strategies a leader can mobilize to attain and maintain superior social status. Simply put, a leader can trade on any of these two discrete status currencies (control versus respect) to maintain their position.

Cheng and colleagues (2013) provide convincing empirical evidence of the above proposition. In one experiment, participants completed a task as part of a five or six-member team. Following the collective exercise, participants rated each group member on their influence over the team outcome as well as the dominance or prestige tactics each individual employed. Participants reported individuals recognized to display greater dominance or prestige as more influential in the group task. Moreover, independent observers who watched the video recordings of team member interactions directed their attention, as measured through an eye tracker, more frequently towards the members who exuded higher dominance or prestige (Cheng et al., 2013). Similarly, an ethnographic study of Tsimane foragers in Bolivia lowlands unveiled both dominance and prestige significantly impacted elevated-standing within the Tsimane community (von Rueden, Gurven, & Kaplan, 2010). Collectively, there is evidence mounting for dominance and prestige as two distinct and viable strategies for preserving social status and influence (see Maner & Case, 2016 for review).
Dominance, Prestige, and Attributions of Wrongdoing

The notion an actor’s social status plays a critical role in the judgments, decisions, and behaviors directed towards them is not novel. Indeed, a growing literature speaks to the dynamic rather than static nature of social status (Bendersky & Shah, 2013; Bunderson, Van der Vegt, & Sparrowe, 2013; Hays & Bendersky, 2015; Kilduff, Willer, & Anderson, 2016; Pettit et al., 2013; Pettit, Yong, & Spataro, 2010). For example, when onlookers judge an actor’s status, they incorporate the actor’s most recent rise or fall in rank within the social hierarchy (Pettit et al. 2013). Similarly, we contend beyond overall status, observers’ judgments of actors’ transgressions may remarkably depend on the status strategy with which individuals navigate their social landscape. Specifically, do they barter expending their currency of dominance or prestige? Additionally, building on theoretical model of third-party retribution in organizational and social justice research, whereby transgressor’s characteristics influence both the attributions and the resulting punitive actions directed towards them (Malle & Knobe, 1997; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004), we predict observers will ascribe different levels of intentionality to dominant versus prestige based individuals for similar misdeeds.

We reason individuals associated with a dominance status strategy employ tactics focused primarily on preserving their superior position in the group without taking into consideration goals and aspirations of other group members. Their actions generally reflect self-serving motives; thus, onlookers perceive such individuals as highly agentic, determined, and capable of taking decisive actions in comparison to their prestigious counterpart (Halevy et al., 2012; Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017; Laustsen & Petersen, 2015). Integrating these two characteristics of a dominant high-status actor—self-serving and agentic, we postulate third party observers will consider the leader’s ambiguous norm violation more intentional than that of a
prestige based leader. Several studies demonstrate dominant leaders’ tendencies to act in a manner consistent with their objective of maintaining their cherished elevated rank. For instance, dominance based leaders tend to ostracize or demote talented group members, and they further withhold critical information to perpetuate group members’ dependence (Maner & Mead, 2010). Moreover, dominant leaders restrict competent group members from bonding with others as a means to reduce any threat to their valued leadership position (Case & Maner, 2014). To sabotage their progress, such leaders even allocate skillful employees to jobs unsuitable for their skillset (Maner & Case, 2016). Thus, dominance based leadership stereotypes reflecting highly agentic and egotistically driven individuals will influence third-party observers’ judgments when evaluating their ambiguous norm violations. To this point, observers will attribute greater intentionality to their actions, particularly norm violations.

Moreover, attribution theorists state “those who do negligent harm are judged less responsible than those who do intentional harm” (Darley & Shultz, 1990, p. 533). For instance, workers (e.g., pharmacists filling the wrong prescription, or repairmen worsening television circuits), meet with a more retributory response when others perceive such actions as deliberate, rather than accidental (Shultz & Wright, 1985). Similarly, a study investigating third-party punishments of norm violations discovered purposeful transgressions received graver chastisement, even at a cost to punishers, compared to identical misdeeds that lacked intentionality (Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009). Consistent with this, Fragale and colleagues (2009) showed ambiguous transgressions by high-status actors compared to their low-status counterparts, experienced severe reprimand because their actions bore the perception of intentionality. Further examination of their findings (Study 2) revealed their status manipulation to be more in line with dominance than prestige. Adding to the evidence, participants rated the
high-status actor significantly higher on items such as dominance, confidence, concern about oneself, timidity (reverse-coded) and submissiveness (reverse-coded), which exemplifies attributes generally associated with high-status individuals operating with a dominance rather than prestige strategy (Cheng et al., 2010; Maner & Case, 2016). This provides preliminary evidence of our theoretical assertion that dominant high-status actors are likely to encounter severe sanction for an ambiguous transgression than their prestige based high-status counterparts. Altogether, we claim intentionality attributions weigh heavily on observers’ recommendation of harsher reprimand for dominant high-status actors. Specifically, we predict high-status dominance based actors will experience more severe penalty because of observers’ heightened attributions of intentionality.

In contrast, leaders operating in the currency of prestige rely less on actively coercing others into submission. Instead, other group members keenly seek their advice and try to learn from their superior knowledge, skills, and expertise (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Thus, rather than imposing their assertiveness, prestige-based strategies achieve status by fostering skills and abilities among group members who lack such capabilities. This, in turn, grants these individuals greater respect, recognition, and admiration in the eyes of others. Given the focus of this strategy is aimed at helping others rather than promoting one’s self-interests, followers discern such individuals to possess greater positive attributes and to be more likable (Cheng et al., 2010; Maner & Case, 2016). For example, in comparison to high-status dominant actors, group members report prestige based individuals exemplify more altruism and cooperation (Halevy et al., 2012), reduced narcissism, superior ethical standards, and broader social acceptability in the community (Cheng et al., 2010). Thus, when a prestigious individual is accused of wrongdoing for an ambiguous norm violation, observers in light of a number of positive attributions will give
the defendant the benefit of doubt, judge their actions as less deliberate, and hold them less accountable (cf. Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Markedly, a simple positive stereotype may not necessarily buffer the impact of others’ evaluation, as evidenced by extreme punitive actions against individuals who *blatantly* violate their positive stereotype. Specifically, engaging in behaviors that go against the desired image can lead observers to react vehemently, for they view the violator a hypocrite (Burgoon, 2015; Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Thus, a high-status prestigious individual does not necessarily qualify for reduced judgments of intentionality, but such positive schema is especially helpful when the transgression is ambiguous. We delve on this possibility further in the general discussion section.

Given, the other-oriented nature of a prestige strategy via helping, sharing information, and advising other group members, at times even at a personal cost; it results in greater moral credentials granted to such individuals. Moral credentials license or absolve individuals of norm violation behavior (Miller & Effron, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001). Others construe subsequent norm violation behaviors “as if it were not a transgression at all” when a person amasses moral credentials based on one’s virtuous behavioral history (Miller & Effron, 2010, p. 126). Stated differently, moral credentials allow others to interpret the same ethical transgression as more acceptable than when one lacks moral precedence. For instance, manager’s dubious sexual overtures were not considered as sexual harassment when the manager historically supported sexual-harassment policies compared to when the behavior proved unambiguous or such history remained absent (Effron & Monin, 2010).

Individuals who operate with prestige status strategy construct a virtuous history of benevolence, helpfulness, and caring to advance their moral credentials that cushions them from
indeterminate misdeeds. Indeed, Polman and colleagues (2013) found high compared to low-status actors received a diminished penalty when partaking in ambiguous norm transgression because their accrued moral credentials buffered them against others retributive judgments. Thus, in the absence of unassailable evidence, prestige based leaders might receive the benefit of the doubt because of their accumulated moral credentials and hence met with less severe reprimands. Finally, Polman and colleagues (2013) status manipulation was one based on prestige than dominance. The authors define status as “the respect, prestige, and admiration that individuals enjoy in the eyes of others” (p. 615). Similarly, in other studies where status was manipulated using job titles, actors with high prestige jobs (e.g., surgeon, bank manager, etc.) encountered less castigation in comparison to lower prestige jobs (e.g., dermatologist, convenience store clerk, etc.) (Loeffler & Lawson, 2002; Rosoff, 1989). Again, this provides preliminary suggestive evidence in line with our theoretical assertion that prestige based leaders receive the benefit of the doubt and experience fewer repercussions for transgressions due to their accrued moral credentials. We, therefore, expect third-party observers will punish high-status prestige based actors less severely because of reduced attributions of intentionality and the admired person’s accumulated moral credentials.

In summary, we predict third-party observers will punish more harshly ambiguous transgressions committed by high-status dominance actors in comparison to similar misdeeds performed by high-status prestige actors. Furthermore, when accused of such offenses, observers will judge the offensive actions of high-status dominance actors as calculated, resulting in harsher retaliation. Thus, consistent with past research assessing transgressor intentionality (e.g., Fragale et al., 2009), we expect when accused of transgressing social norms, others will consider the ambiguous wrongdoing more intentional for the dominant than prestige based actors.
Moreover, in line with past research on moral credentials (e.g., Polman et al. 2013), we anticipate prestige based high-status actors will garner greater moral credentials than dominant high-status actors will, and this will shield the impact of the comeuppance levied against them. Hence, we hypothesize third-party reprimand for ambiguous transgressions will prove exacerbated for dominant compared to prestige based leaders, due to observers’ greater attribution of intentionality and lack of moral credentials afforded to high-status dominant actors. Formally stated:

**Hypothesis 1:** When high-status actors transgress social norms, such actors experience harsher punishment if their status is based on dominance rather than prestige.

**Hypothesis 2:** Transgression of high-status actors will be perceived as more intentional if their status is based on dominance rather than prestige.

**Hypothesis 3:** High-status actors will be granted greater moral credentials if their status is based on prestige rather than dominance.

**Hypothesis 4:** Observers’ attribution of intentionality and moral credentials will mediate the relationship between actors’ social status based on dominance or prestige and observers’ recommendation of harsher punishment for their transgressions.

**OVERVIEW OF STUDIES**

Across six studies (three in the supplementary materials)¹, we demonstrate the manner in which a high-status individual operates (dominance versus prestige) shapes observers’ judgments of actor’s transgressions. Consistent with prior research, in all our studies we restrict transgressions to violations with multiple plausible explanations of intentionality on the part of the transgressor (Fragale et al. 2009). Thus, in the understudied misdeeds, observers cannot

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¹ The online supplement can be found here: https://osf.io/9na53/?view_only=cbef1f6318f34448862fefa923e64405
readily ascertain culpability; thus, importantly, the offender’s motive remains indeterminate. In Study 1, we first validate the phenomenon high-status dominant actors encounter more severe punishment than their prestigious counterpart within the real-world context of professional hockey, particularly, the National Hockey League (NHL). In Study 2, we manipulate group leader’s dominance and prestige behaviors to unmask whether team members discipline a dominant group leader more than a prestigious leader for questionable norm violation. Finally, in Study 3, we independently manipulate both dominance and prestige to address which of the two strategies drives our effects. In addition, Study 3 also tests the mechanisms behind this differential retaliation directed towards dominance and prestige based leaders for similar transgressions. Collectively, we provide a parsimonious account (i.e., both when and why) for the nuanced role of dominance and prestige based status approaches in influencing judgments, decisions, and behaviors of third-party punishers towards high-status transgressors.

Markedly, across our studies and consistent with our research question, we focus mostly on norm violations of high-status actors. Study 1 though examines retaliatory action against low-status offenders, but we do not explore this in detail. We concentrate only on high-status actor’s violations for several reasons. High-status leaders in comparison to low-status are sought out more for information in both their public and private lives; therefore, their actions attract greater attention (Cowen, 2000; Sutton & Galunic, 1996). For instance, 20% of the CEOs drive 80% of the media coverage, coined the “CEO celebrity” effect (Hamilton & Zeckhauser, 2004). Moreover, high-status actors are targeted more for their actions and suffer greater consequences in comparison to others. For example, high-status investment banks are regulated more stringently than low-status banks (Cole, 2007); star CEOs receive less pay when their firm performs poorly than non-stellar CEOs (Wade et al. 2006). Thus, given the perennial spotlight on
high-status individuals and inconsistent findings in the literature among these individuals with elevated ranking, we mostly direct our inquiry on them.

**STUDY 1**

The goal of Study 1 was to demonstrate our phenomenon of interest (Hypothesis 1) in a real world hierarchical setting. Specifically, we examined professional ice-hockey players in the National Hockey League (NHL) and the minor penalties (punishment) handed down to them for infringing on game rules (norm violation behavior). Though clear rules for awarding minor penalties exist, often it is a judgment call with referees having to make these decisions in a split second after spotting the infraction from a bad angle and without the benefit of video replay. Furthermore, players are charged with minor penalties, despite not having deliberately committed a foul, highlighting the ambiguous nature of these incidents. Additionally, the data we examined occurred after a significant penalty rule change in the NHL that promoted previous general penalties such as clipping, charging, elbowing, etc., which resulted in minor penalties before, to a more serious foul category that often lead to major penalties (NHL, 2014). This rule change further blurred the boundaries for imposing minor penalties in the subsequent season of the NHL, with penalties now based on a smaller set of infractions. Moreover, changes in rules introduce greater noise to the decision-making process initially, which is further compounded when such decisions are made under time-pressure (Edland & Svenson, 1993). Both factors – ambiguity in refereeing a minor penalty and time pressure– leave open the possibility of the player’s reputation influencing the referee’s verdict. In fact, existing research demonstrates referees’ decision of awarding a penalty is influenced by players’ or teams’ reputation irrespective of the actual play (Jones, Paull, & Erskine, 2002; Kim & King, 2014). Similarly, others contend a player’s reputation is one of the prevailing bias that often guides referees’
decisions in the NHL (Johnston, 2018; Surowiecki, 2016). Taken together, the ambiguity in assigning minor penalties by a referee provides a fitting real-world context to test our hypothesis.

We, therefore, postulate over the course of a season, with multiple incidents and decision points for the referees to hand out minor penalties, the relationship between high-status prestige players and punishments awarded to them will be negative whereas the relationship between high-status dominant players and corresponding punishment levied will be positive.

**SAMPLE**

We collected two years of season data for all NHL players (2014-16). This included all completed seasons post the introduction of the major rule changes prior to the 2014-15 season that gave referees greater autonomy in calling major penalties leaving greater ambiguity for dispensing minor penalties. The NHL season consists of 30 teams (23 US and 7 Canadian) with each team playing 82 games, resulting in a total of 1230 games per season. Our data consisted of 1,294 observations of player performance in a particular season with 756 unique players across the two seasons. Some players at the end of season 1 retired, demoted to the minor league or played in a different professional league overseas. As a result, total number of observations stands not twice that of the total number of unique players.

**MEASURES**

**Dependent Variable**

**Punishment.** We measured punishment referees doled out for minor transgressions using penalty in minutes (PIM). PIM presents an objective measure that indicates the total number of minutes a player stands reprimanded, for they must exit the ice (i.e. barred from taking part in the game); consequently, their team plays “a man short”. Since the PIM data we collected was

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2 We did not to include goalkeepers, for goalkeeper rarely, if ever, incur a penalty.
aggregated for the whole season, we normalized it by dividing by the total number of games a player participated over the course of a season.

**Independent Variables**

The two key independent variables in this study were a player’s status based on dominance and prestige. To accurately measure status based on prestige, it was essential to separate this from overall status of the player. Hence, we used regression residuals obtained after accounting for player’s performance on their overall status to quantify prestige (Apicella, 2014; Roberts & Dowling, 2002). We calculated dominance based status by interacting a physiological marker of dominance with player’s overall status, such that we considered those with high-status and dominant markers to possess status based on dominance. Accordingly, we measured overall status, prestige, and dominance in this study, but limited our analysis to status based on dominance or prestige in line with H1.

**Overall Status.** Status was operationalized as the current salary a given player received as those with higher status are considered more competent; hence, the league compensates them accordingly (Idson & Kahane, 2000; Vincent & Eastman, 2009). Moreover, research utilizes salary extensively as a marker of high status, as competent individuals typify high-performers, and organization award them with increased salaries and incentives (Barron & Waddell, 2003; Belliveau, O’Reilly, & Wade, 1996; Bloom, 1999; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Tiedens, 2001), especially in the context of professional sports (Harder, 1992; Rosen & Sanderson, 2001; Scully, 1974).

**Prestige.** As discussed, prestige is essentially one’s recognized reputation in the group as it remains based on others’ respect and admiration. We thus operationalized prestige similar to the reputation or deference measure used in past research by accounting for (i.e., partial out) the
variability based on one’s performance from the overall status measure, and utilizing those residuals as a measure of others’ respect and deference (Apicella, 2014; Castellucci & Ertug, 2010; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Helou & Park, 2001; Roberts & Dowling, 2002). Player’s reputation is typically a function of their objective performance and the intangible value they bring to the team by helping others and being a role model—a trait synonymous with highly esteemed prestige-based actors. Thus, to accurately measure prestige, it was essential to separate objective markers of performance from the unobservable ones (Apicella, 2014; Helou & Park, 2001; Roberts & Dowling, 2002). Hence, we regressed player’s performance in the previous season—the most proximal performance driver of their salary at the beginning of the current season—on their overall status and used regression residuals as a measure of unobservables that accounted for their reputation or prestige. We measured past performance of the player (i.e. player’s performance in the previous season) using an integrated measure of corsi. Sports analysts dealing in big data and high-end analytics, advocate the use of advanced performance indicators that holistically capture the unique contributions a player makes within a team, such as corsi. Corsi measures the impact an individual player has on a team in terms of the scoring opportunities the team experiences or the lack of scoring opportunities the opposing team encounters when the focal player participates in play. Corsi possesses a better, comprehensive predictive validity in assessing player performance compared to looking at standard performance measures: goals, assists or goal ratio (Hawerchuk, 2009; Likens, 2011; Macdonald, 2012).

We then regressed player’s past performance indicator: corsi, on their overall status i.e. salary for the current year, controlling for the previous year’s salary, their current salary relative to other members on the team and their age as some players can accrue reputation based on the number of years in the league. The regression residuals of salary obtained after accounting for
player’s objective performance, relative salary, age, and previous year salary were employed as an operationalization of prestige. Thus, our prestige measure was conservative, as we only captured unobservable attributes by also partialling out factors that are often associated with prestige, e.g., relative salary and age. In short, the salary awarded to players beyond their objective performance and relative to others on the team held an indication of the intangible value they bring to the team in terms of their reputation or prestige.

**Dominance.** Following past research (Carré, McCormick, & Mondloch, 2009; Haselhuhn, Ormiston, & Wong, 2015; Mileva, Cowan, Cobey, Knowles, & Little, 2014), we first measured player’s general tendency to exert dominance using face width-to-height ratio (fWHR). It is critical to note, this is a physiological marker of dominance and not an indicator of one’s status based on dominance. We first describe fWHR as our operationalization for generalized dominance, followed by how we use that to account for player’s status based on dominance.

Several studies assert greater face width-to-height ratio reflects an individual difference among men that remains associated with both self and other rated trait dominance (Mileva et al., 2014). Dominant behaviors comprise acting aggressively (Haselhuhn et al. 2015), engendering an aggressive perception (Carré et al., 2009), and exuding a higher sense of psychological power; thus, the individual exerts greater control over other group members (Wong, Ormiston, & Haselhuhn, 2011). Men with higher fWHR possess a greater concentration of testosterone (Verdonck, Gaethofs, Carels, & Zegher, 1999), a hormone that directly influences dominant tendencies (Mazur & Booth, 1998; Mehta & Josephs, 2006). Given the consistent findings that demonstrate a positive correlation between fWHR and trait dominance, we implemented higher values of fWHR as a proxy for broad dominance tendencies. We calculated fWHR by dividing bizygomatic width (i.e. the widest length of the face) with upper facial height (length between
upper lip and brow) (Carré et al., 2009). Accordingly, we collected photographs of all players that participated in the 2014-16 seasons via NHL’s official website (www.NHL.com). Consistent with past research (e.g. Carré et al. 2009, Wong et al. 2011), we standardized each image to the same format: 400-pixel size, similar color and intensity of background, etc. Finally, two independent coders unaware of the hypothesis measured bizygomatic width and upper facial height for each player utilizing an open source software, Image J. Markedly, there existed a high inter-rater agreement between the two coders for facial height ($\alpha=.94$), width ($\alpha=.97$) and the overall ratio – fWHR ($\alpha=.91$).

However, as mentioned above, our hypothesis is not bound to a general physiological marker of dominance, but rather we predicted the accentuation of the effect for high-status dominant actors. In other words, exerting dominance does not automatically lead to higher status. Rather, only when dominant individuals garner the perception as competent, others grant them higher status (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Hence, we interacted fWHR with the overall status of the player and examined the interaction effect of dominance and status on punishment, such that players high on fWHR and overall status will experience the most disciplinary action exercised by the referees. We contend the interaction term of fWHR and status i.e. the players with greater dominance tendencies coupled with high-status will be classified as players with dominance-based status.

Additionally, we find salary and player performance to be positively correlated allowing us to use salary as a proxy for player’s status ($b=.24, p<.001$). We find identical results if we use performance (i.e. corsi) instead of salary as a measure of status, however, we used salary as we wanted to maintain consistency with our use of salary as the overall measure of status.
Control Variables

We controlled for several factors that posed a potential to influence our dependent variable, PIM. For instance, existing research illustrated physical features of a player such as body weight may result in greater penalties (Deaner, Goetz, Shattuck, & Schnotala, 2012); hence, we controlled for height, weight, body-mass index (BMI) and age of the player. We also controlled for PIM awarded to a player in the previous season as a baseline measure of punishment for an individual player. Furthermore, we controlled for the position a player plays whether it is forward (center, right-wing or left-wing), or defense as certain positions draw more penalties, their current performance using the corsi measure, the experience of the player based on their draft year, shooting hand of the player and season fixed effects. Finally, we performed a multilevel regression with teams as the higher-level factor to partial out any variance due to team level randomness, for example, some teams prefer to play more aggressively and hence incur greater penalty in minutes, etc. Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among variables.

-----Insert Table 1 and Table 2 here-----

RESULTS

Table 2 shows multi-level regression results with PIM (punishment) as the dependent variable. Model 1 contains all control variables, followed by Model 2 that contains only prestige based status as a predictor after controlling for overall status but without any control variables. Model 3 reports the effect of dominance based status as an interaction of generalized dominance (fWHR) and overall status and controlling for the main effect of both. Models 4 and 5 demonstrate the effect of prestige and dominance based status respectively after accounting for a number of control variables. Finally, Model 6 illustrates the effect of both dominance and
prestige together after accounting for other control variables. In all these models, we find prestige based status to be negatively associated with punishment whereas dominance based status revealed a positive association. We report here results only for Model 6, for it tests the complete model. As seen in Model 6, prestige is negatively associated with punishment ($b=-.02$, $p=.025$) whereas the interaction term measuring dominance based status shows a positive association with punishment ($b=3.52$, $p<.001$). On decomposing the interaction, at one standard deviation above and below status values (Aiken & West, 1991), we find the slope with high-status values is positive and significant ($b=.80$, $p<.001$) suggesting high-status dominant players (i.e. those with higher generalized dominance coupled with high-status) endured more penalties than players with lower generalized dominance. Moreover, the slope for the interaction between low-status values and generalized dominance also hold significant but negative ($b=-.45$, $p=.003$), implying players with low-status and high on dominance experience less penalties than players holding low-status and low dominance encounter. Although we did not hypothesize the significant negative slope of the line for low-status dominant players, this finding warrants further investigation in future research.

As an exploratory analysis, as well as to examine the parallel with dominance, we interacted prestige with overall status in Model 7. It is important to note the support for hypothesis 1 is based on the main effect of prestige rather than the exploratory interaction effect. The interaction effect of prestige and status on punishment was negative and significant ($b=-.21$, $p<.001$). Decomposing the interaction at one standard above and below the status values, revealed at high values of status the slope was significant and negative ($b=-.06$, $p<.001$), signifying as players prestige increases they incurred significantly fewer penalties. The slope at

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3 Refer to Figure S1 in supplementary document for interaction plot.
low values of status was positive but marginally significant ($b=.02, p=.10$), highlighting prestige failed to buffer the retaliatory impact when status was low. This interaction pattern further reveals nuanced role of prestige and status in buffering observers’ punishment judgment and can be explored in future studies. Altogether, these results provide strong support for hypothesis 1.

**DISCUSSION**

Using the real-world context of NHL players across two seasons, Study 1 helps document our phenomenon by providing an initial demonstration that high-status dominant actors were punished more than high-status prestige actors for ambiguous or minor rule violations. These results present initial evidence in favor of our central assertion that status of the transgressor does not solely color observers’ judgment but importantly the status strategy with which the violator operates - dominance versus prestige - influences castigation. Notwithstanding the strong evidence backing our hypothesis, this study only tested and supported one of the four hypotheses. Despite using minor penalties as the dependent variable, it remains plausible the mechanism behind these effects might not be based on intentionality or moral credentials. Thus, our inability to measure the psychological mediator proves a limitation of this study. Moreover, one can never completely rule out endogeneity issues in archival studies — despite controlling for a number of variables and being both careful and conservative with our measures and operationalization — there exists the possibility of other unmeasured variables confounding our results. Further, a potential criticism levied against the current study could be to measure our constructs using traditional scale-based measures or manipulations of dominance or prestige that more precisely captures our target variables. That is, the interaction between fWHR and overall status may not encompass all the variance attributed to dominance based status. Accordingly, in subsequent studies, we manipulate dominance and prestige using existing manipulations in the
literature to ensure the operationalization of our central variables mirrors the theoretical assertion of the two strategies individuals employ to maintain their high status.

**STUDY 2**

The objective of this study was to replicate the findings from Study 1 by manipulating leader’s behavior in terms of either dominance or prestige thereby providing greater causal evidence. Further, we also wanted to mirror the social interactions within organizations where team members interact to resolve a task under leader guidance. We set to achieve this by creating a situation where individuals worked within a team to accomplish a clear task or goal. This protocol mirrors other experiments designed to manipulate status among teams (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006; Cheng et al., 2013). Specifically, we ran a study where participants engaged in a group activity; however, unknown to the participants a confederate acted as the group leader. We instructed the confederate to engage in actions similar to that of a prestige versus dominant leader. Following this interaction, participants engaged in an individual task, designed to examine group members’ reaction towards their group leader after an ambiguous norm violation. In line with our hypothesis, we expected group members to take harsher behavioral actions against the leader engaging in behaviors consistent with a dominance status strategy in comparison to a leader who acts according to prestige status strategy.

**SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE**

*Participants.* We decided to recruit at least 150 participants to ensure we sampled a sufficient number of participants and groups to test our hypothesis. We recruited 160 participants via the behavioral lab of a European business school. However, eight participants failed to follow study protocol or displayed suspicion about the confederate; therefore, we removed them from
the final analysis. Thus, our final sample consisted of 152 participants ($M_{Age} = 30.30$ years, 57.9% females) of which 73 were randomly assigned to the prestige condition and 79 to the dominance condition. These participants encompassed 38 distinct work groups that ranged from three to six members per group including the actor. We aimed for at least four members in each group but due to last minute cancellations, six groups consisted of only three members. Markedly, our results remain identical even if we exclude these groups from our analysis.

**Procedure.** We wanted to ensure our study illustrated both high internal and external validity. Accordingly, we decided to run a study protocol similar to Cheng and colleagues (2013), where they utilized experimental groups to show both dominance and prestige strategies led to similar levels of influence and status among group members. Study 2 protocol consisted of two parts. In the first part, participants first attempted a task individually and then performed the same task as a group where we assigned them to be a group member. This gave them an opportunity to evaluate whether their group leader was high on dominance or prestige. The second part of the study occurred in individual cubicles where participants learned about an ambiguous norm violation of their group leader. Then, we gave participants the opportunity to punish the leader. Below, we describe the complete study protocol in detail.

Upon entering the lab, we gave participants the Lost at Sea exercise (Nemiroff & Pasmore, 2001), which required them to rank order 15-items available on the boat (e.g., a sextant, a shaving mirror, etc.) in order of their importance for survival while awaiting rescue. Participants had 15 minutes to submit their private rankings. Participants then worked as a group on the same task, where they discussed benefits of each item and submitted one ranking as a group. Before starting the group activity, we randomly assigned participants to the role of either

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4 See Figure S3 in the online supplement for schematic diagram of Study 2’s protocol
a team member or a leader using a drawn lottery. However, unknown to them, we rigged the lottery to ensure the confederate was always chosen as the leader. The role of leader was to guide the group’s decision-making process by allowing extensive discussion or brainstorming in deciding the relative importance of those 15 items and produce one rank order as a group. We instructed and trained the confederate, a professional actor, to act based either on a dominance or prestige status strategy. We provided the actor with a summary of typical behavioral cues associated with either leadership style, a dominant or prestige based leader. Specifically, the actor would adopt more expansive postures when behaving with dominance compared to prestige, interrupting and speaking more in the dominance condition compared to being helpful and supportive to others in the prestige condition (Cheng et al., 2013), modulating vocal pitch by speaking in a deeper tone in the dominance condition than in the prestige condition (Cheng, Tracy, Ho, & Henrich, 2016). Following the initial instructions and training, the actor also participated in mock sessions to acclimate to the role by enacting both behaviors and allowing us to provide additional feedback.

After completing the group task and submitting rankings of 15 items as a group, we directed the participants into individual cubicles for the second part of the study. The second part of the study consisted of two stages. In the first stage, participants learned about the group leader’s alleged norm-violation behavior against another anonymized group member. The second stage involved focal participants confronted with the opportunity to punish the group leader by assigning him harder questions as part of a general ability task. We now describe both of these stages in detail.

Participants learned they would either participate in an economic game with another participant or attempt a general ability task with an opportunity to earn extra money. The general
ability task was supposed to start after the economic game. If they were selected for the general ability task, they would have to wait, for we would pair randomly another participant from the economic game task with them. To compensate for their waiting time, we offered the choice to the participants to decide the difficulty level of the general ability task to assign for themselves and their partner. Additionally, we mentioned that they would be informed about the rules of the economic game and a brief overview of the ostensible economic transaction that would take place between the two other participants. In reality, all participants were assigned to the general ability task and were made to wait until the hypothetical economic game between two other participants from the group was finished.

While waiting for their general ability task to begin, participants engaged in a filler activity of dot estimation task. After finishing the filler task, they read the rules of the supposed economic game that took place between the two other group members. This dictator game posed the offerer the opportunity to split £5 in any way between themselves and the receiver. However, we explicitly informed the participants of the typical norm of splitting the amount equally. We then paid the offerer and receiver according to the offerer determined allocation. Nonetheless, there existed a 30% chance a computer algorithm may overrule the offerer’s decision and split the amount randomly between the two participants. Adding the algorithmic error into the mix interjected a sense of ambiguity to the offerer’s decision, as the final allocation could potentially result from the computer algorithm. After the amount was divided, we provided the hypothetical receiver an opportunity to comment on the interaction with the partner.

After disseminating information about the rules of economic games, we gave the participants a brief summary of the economic transaction that transpired between the offerer and receiver. They learned the game occurred between the group leader and another group member,
where group leader played the role of the offerer. Participants then read the statement from the receiver of economic transaction— a hypothetical group member —about one’s experience in the economic game, which stated, “Group leader took less than 5 seconds to decide, kept a substantial amount of money for himself and transferred practically nothing”. This message reflected the group leader potentially violated the norm of splitting the money evenly.

Subsequently, participants started the general ability task and learned they were paired up with a group leader who played the role of offerer in the economic game task. Participants first attempted two trial questions similar to the questions that would appear in the general ability task, and we informed them that solving each would lead to a reward of £0.10. The questions required finding two numbers that add up to ten in a 3x3 matrix within 15 seconds (cf. Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). After attempting two trial questions of moderate difficulty, we gave participants the opportunity to choose four questions for their partner, the group leader, from the eight available choices, consisting of four easy and four difficult questions. Any question the group leader successfully answered in the general ability task would result in an additional monetary benefit of £0.10 for the leader. Thus, assigning hard questions to the leader bore tangible monetary ramifications for the leader. The total number of difficult questions assigned to the group leader served as the operationalization of punishment for violating the norm of allocating the money equally. Following this, participants did not partake in any general ability task but as a manipulation check rated the group leader on a validated scale of dominance and prestige (Cheng et al., 2010). Participants indicated their ratings on a seven-point Likert scale to represent the extent to which they agree with each statement (1 = not at all; 4 = somewhat; 7 = very much). A sample item for dominance, “Group leader tried to control other members rather than permit them to control him/her”, $\alpha_{dom}=.86$. A sample item for prestige, “Group leader was
respected and admired by other members”, $\alpha_{Ptg}=.91$. Participants then submitted their demographic details; we paid them for their participation and debriefed them.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check. In line with our expectation, participants reported the group leader higher in dominance than prestige in the dominance condition, $t(156)=2.68, p=.008$, ($M_{Dom} = 3.99, SD=1.25$, $M_{Ptg}=3.46, SD=1.24$) and higher in prestige than dominance in the prestige condition, $t(156)=2.68, p=.008$, ($M_{Ptg} = 3.76, SD=1.32$, $M_{Dom} = 3.27, SD=1.20$). These results indicate our manipulation of dominance versus prestige, worked along expected lines. As an additional check of our manipulation, we inspected whether the leader’s influence remained the same across the two conditions since both status strategies should be equally influential (Cheng et al., 2013). Consistent with past research, we measured influence as the absolute difference between participant’s private ranking and group ranking. We discovered for 14 out of the 15 items, there existed a significant difference between the group’s and the participant’s private rankings ($p<.001$) when collapsed across the two conditions. Furthermore, this difference in private and group rankings was not significant for any of the 15 items ($p>.05$) across the two conditions, suggesting the leader remained equally persuasive and influential in swaying group members’ initial private rankings across the two status strategies. In short, our manipulation worked as intended. Critically, the confederate possessed high status in their ability to influence the attitudes and behaviors of group members irrespective of the two strategies employed: dominance or prestige.

Punishment. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in the number of hard questions assigned to the group leader across the two conditions, $F(1,150)=4.80, p=.03$, such that team members assigned the group leader a greater proportion of hard questions in the dominance
than prestige condition ($M_{Dom}=1.86$, $SD=.75$, $M_{Ptg}=1.60$, $SD=.70$). Since participants’ ratings were nested within groups, one-way ANOVA may not be the most appropriate analytical method. Accordingly, we performed a multilevel regression analysis coding dominant condition as 1 and prestige as 0, with groups as the higher-level factor and controlling for the total number of participants in groups and their key demographics (age, gender). In support of our hypothesis, we found the dominance condition significantly correlated with punishment compared to prestige ($b=.32$, $p=.01$). Overall, in an experimentally manipulated lab study, we replicated our findings from Study 1 in support of our theorized hypotheses (H1).

**DISCUSSION**

The primary goal of this study was to replicate the findings of Study 1 by experimentally manipulating dominance and prestige of a leader. Moreover, to ensure greater external validity, we set out to replicate these effects within the context of a group-oriented task that mirrored tasks one could expect within an organizational context. To that end, we randomly allocated participants to groups where the group leader used either dominance or prestige oriented status strategies. We also employed a behavioral variable of punishment to demonstrate further the robustness of this effect, by extending it beyond mere attitudes and intentions (cf. Fragale et al., 2009; Polman et al., 2013). Overall, manipulating leader’s dominance or prestige using real groups, we provide a greater assertion of causality. In the next study, we explore the psychological mechanisms driving our effects and test our remaining hypotheses.

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5 See Table S1 in the supplementary document for further information
STUDY 3

Study 3 was performed to further clarify whether dominance and prestige are the critical variables affecting sanctioning of high-status actors’ ambiguous norm violation behaviors. According to our theory, it remains conceivable either greater dominance leads to higher retribution recommendations or greater prestige leads to lower sanctioning or alternatively the interaction of both variables. To test empirically these possibilities, we manipulated both dominance and prestige based status of the focal actor. Thus, we described the high-status individual in the scenario as high or low on each of the two status strategies. Orthogonally manipulating both dominance and prestige also allowed us to examine how observers perceive relatively low-status individuals (low-prestige low-dominance cell) in comparison to high-status actors following acts of ambiguous transgression. The study also intended to capture the psychological process behind findings in Studies 1 and 2 and test all the proposed hypotheses. Specifically, we wanted to examine the role of intentionality attributions and moral credentials as two distinct psychological mechanisms influencing third-party punishment of high-status actors following ambiguous transgression. Finally, to bolster the generalizability and robustness of our findings, in the current study we employed two scenarios, one directly adapted from prior research where a CEO of a Fortune 500 company stands accused of tax fraud (Fragale et al., 2009) and another a recruitment scenario involving a senior vice president of a Fortune 500 company. We focused on a senior leader (e.g. CEO or VP) as a senior leadership position is synonymous with high status but then varied the status type by describing his behavior as high or

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6 Three additional studies demonstrate the robustness of our findings, by measuring dominance and prestige, ruling out alternate explanation of liking, transgressor’s gender, competence, perceived power and testing the complete model. See supplementary document.
low in dominance or prestige. This allowed us to test directly the hypothesis of punishing high-status dominant/prestige actors following acts of ambiguous moral violations.

**METHOD**

**Participants.** We collected a large sample size to ensure we detect any interaction effect of dominance and prestige. A total of 498 participants recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) completed the study, of which three participants were excluded for taking the study more than once, and four additional participants for failing the attention check question. The final sample consisted of 491 participants (51.12% females, $M_{age} = 35.55$ years, $SD_{age} = 11.30$).

**Design and Procedure.** This presented a complete between participants design. We randomly assigned participants to either a 2 (dominance: high; (n = 246) versus low (n = 245)) X 2 (prestige: high (n = 245) versus low (n = 246)) X 2 (scenarios: CEO or VP) cell. In the high dominance condition\(^7\), we described the CEO or VP as controlling and dominating with colleagues, whereas in the low dominance actor condition, we depicted the CEO as lacking dominance or control. Similarly, in the high prestige condition, we portrayed the CEO or VP as holding the respect and admiration of fellow colleagues. In the low prestige condition, we represented the CEO as lacking respect or admiration. We counterbalanced the order of dominance and prestige between participants. As discussed, we utilized two different scenarios, but we randomly assigned participants to only one scenario. We adapted one of the scenarios directly from prior research (Fragale et al., 2009), where a CEO of the Fortune 500 Company, K Wallace, stood accused of tax fraud; thus, the transgression benefited the CEO directly, but it remained unclear whether the transgression was blatant or an honest mistake. Specifically, participants read:

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\(^7\) The manipulations were pretested with a different sample. See Study S2 in supplementary materials.
Recently, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) accused K. Wallace of underpaying the federal government on his personal income taxes. Over the past few years, federal tax laws have become increasingly complex, and there are now more rules and regulations than ever before. Over this same period of time, the IRS has documented a substantial rise in improper tax returns. Some are a result of simple mistakes, while others are deliberate attempts to pay lower taxes. Although official charges have not been filed against K. Wallace, the IRS alleges that K. Wallace’s tax return understated the amount of money that he owed to the federal government.

The other scenario described a senior, white vice president in a Fortune 500 company overseeing new recruitment, and he failed to hire a suitable African American candidate. Therefore, we created an ambiguous racial transgression that allegedly demonstrated prejudicial behavior on the part of the high-status actor. Specifically, participants read:

Recently, an African American candidate who gave a recruitment interview to Eric Jones in response to the job opening advertisement accused him of racial discrimination. The candidate argued that he had over 10 years of experience and was well suited for the job but was passed on because of his skin color. In response, Eric Jones released a statement saying, there were several well-qualified candidates and he chose the one that was most suitable for the job. Although official charges have not been filed against Eric Jones, the candidate is exploring legal options for being denied the job.

In both scenarios, we first described the actor as high/low on dominance/prestige before participants read the scenario. We measured punishment by asking participants how harshly they would punish the actor and if a legal case should be filed against him ($\alpha = .90$). We quantified moral credentials by employing a composite of three items assessing how moral, wrong and
unethical his behavior was (α = .87) (cf. Polman et al., 2013) and intentionality using a single-item asking how strongly they felt the behavior was deliberate (cf. Fragale et al., 2009).

Participants also responded to a single item manipulation check, which appraised actor’s overall status.

RESULTS

We performed a series of four-way and three-way ANOVAs including the actor’s level of dominance and prestige, the order of these two descriptions and the two scenarios as between-subject factors, for all reported variables. Neither any four-way, nor any three-way interactions held significant for any of the reported measures. Therefore, we excluded the order of actor descriptions and scenario effects from subsequent analyses.

Manipulation Check. A 2 (dominance: high versus low) X 2 (prestige: high versus low) ANOVA with status judgments as the dependent variable revealed a main effect of both dominance (F(1,487) = 50.02, p < .001, η² = .09) and prestige (F(1,487) = 59.94, p < .001, η² = .11) and also a significant interaction effect (F(1,487) = 6.08, p = .014, η² = .01). Planned comparison of means revealed the actor demonstrated significantly less status when both prestige and dominance was low (M = 4.04, SD = 1.88), compared to when prestige was low but dominance was high (M = 5.44, SD = 1.44, t(244) = 6.56, p < .001) and compared to when prestige was high but dominance was low (M = 5.36, SD = 1.50, t(244) = 6.09, p < .001). Both in turn were significantly lower in status compared to when both prestige and dominance were high (M = 6.07, SD = 1.19, p < .001). Thus, participants afforded the actor the highest status when both dominance and prestige held high and least when both remained low, with intermediate status conferred when either of dominance or prestige was high. Overall, our manipulations worked to orthogonally manipulate dominance and prestige as two alternate forms of status.
**Punishment severity.** To test our main hypothesis, we performed a 2 (dominance: high versus low) \times 2 (prestige: high versus low) ANOVA with punishment severity judgments as the dependent variable, which unveiled two significant main effects. First, observers punished the actor significantly more when dominance was high ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.82$) compared to when it was low ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.71$, $F(1,487) = 15.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$). Conversely, observers levied less castigation when we described the actor as high in prestige ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.70$) than when low ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.76$, $F(1,487) = 36.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$). We did not observe any interaction effect ($F(1,487) = 0.29$, $p = .60$). Comparing the high dominance low prestige cell to the low dominance high prestige cell, revealed a significant difference in punishment such that the actor in the former cell experienced significantly more repercussions ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.79$) than the actor in the latter cell ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.59$, $t(245) = 7.1$, $p < .001$), thus supporting Hypothesis 1. Overall, the analysis highlighted both dominance and prestige influenced punishment ratings independently but in opposite directions.

**Intentionality.** We detected a similar pattern for attributions of intentionality. There existed main effects of both dominance ($F(1,487) = 16.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$) and prestige ($F(1,487) = 43.0$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$), but no interaction ($F(1,487) = 0.02$, $p = .89$). Participants considered transgression significantly more intentional in the high ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.95$) as opposed to the low dominance condition ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.84$). Conversely, observers conceived such actions as less intentional in the high ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.77$) rather than the low prestige condition ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.92$). When comparing the two incongruent cells of high dominance but low prestige to low dominance but high prestige, observers judged intentionality significantly greater in the former cell ($M_1 = 4.40$, $SD_1 = 1.93$, $M_2 = 2.67$, $SD_2 = 1.66$, $t(245) =$
7.55, p < .001). Overall, our findings supports Hypothesis 2, and both dominance and prestige independently affected leader’s intentionality judgments, but in opposite directions.

**Moral credentials.** Consistent with our prediction we observed main effects of both dominance ($F(1,487) = 4.51, p = .034, \eta^2 = .01$) and prestige ($F(1,487) = 42.18, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$) on moral credentials, and no interaction ($F(1,487) = 0.28, p = .60$). Participants in the high dominance condition reported actor’s behavior as more unethical, thus bestowing lower moral credentials ($M = 3.78, SD = 1.76$) than participants in the low dominance condition ($M = 4.11, SD = 1.76$). Conversely, participants assigned to the high prestige condition afforded greater moral credentials ($M = 4.44, SD = 1.73$) than participants in the low prestige condition ($M = 3.45, SD = 1.66$). Comparing the two incongruent cells, we found participants delegated to the high dominance but low prestige condition imparted significantly less moral credentials than participants allocated to the low dominance but high prestige condition ($M_1 = 3.32, SD_1 = 1.63$, $M_2 = 4.64, SD_2 = 1.68$, $t(245) = 6.22, p < .001$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 remains supported.

**Mediation analysis.** In line with our hypothesis, we performed bootstrap mediation analysis using structural equation modeling by examining participants’ responses in the high dominance condition compared to those in the high prestige condition. We coded dominance as 1 and prestige as 0. We incorporated intentionality and moral credentials as two parallel mediators and punishment as the dependent variable (see Figure 1). We noted a significant indirect effect of dominance compared to prestige via intentionality on punishment ($b = .69, p < .001, 95\% CI [.48, .98]$). Further, in comparison to prestige, indirect effect of dominance on punishment via lack of moral credentials was also significant ($b = .50, p < .001, 95\% CI [.32, .73]$). Overall the total effect of dominance on punishment was significant in comparison to prestige ($b = 1.19, p < .001, 95\% CI [.85, 1.54]$), thus supporting Hypothesis 4. As an additional analysis, we inspected
whether indirect effect of high dominance/prestige via the two mediators was also significant in comparison to low dominance/prestige condition respectively. Mediation analysis comparing cells high on dominance with cells low on dominance resulted in a significant total indirect effect by both intentionality and moral credentials ($b=.47$, $p=.001$, 95%CI [.18, .75]). Similarly, we noted a significant negative indirect effect via the two mediators when we compared cells high on prestige with those low on prestige ($b=.95$, $p<.001$, 95%CI [-1.24, -.68]). This additional analysis exhibited the two status strategies separately influence observer’s punishment via intentionality and moral credentials such that dominance leads to greater punishment while prestige lowers sanctioning.

-------- Insert Figure 1 here --------

**DISCUSSION**

By orthogonally manipulating dominance and prestige, we experimentally pinpointed which of the two status strategies drove third-party censure of high-status actors. As theorized, we find both dominance and prestige as influencing observers’ corrective judgments, such that greater dominance leads to higher retaliation and greater prestige results in lower retribution. Additionally, there existed no interaction of the two status strategies suggesting the status conditions independently influence observers’ judgments. Importantly, Study 3 replicated our findings from previous studies and tested the complete model by testing all four hypotheses within one study, highlighting the pivotal role attributions of intentionality (Fragale et al., 2009) and moral credentials (Polman et al., 2013) play in explaining harsher punishment meted out to dominant high-status actors. Moreover, by including two different scenarios where the VP stood accused of wrongful recruitment practices and the CEO of a Fortune 500 firm implicated in the
filing of improper tax returns, this study further demonstrates the generalizability and the robustness of our findings across different organizational contexts.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The Matthew effect of cumulative advantage is generally associated with one’s social status such that initial high status results in outcomes that are more favorable for such individuals, which in turn grants them even further social status. This phenomenon is typically invoked to articulate the “stickiness” and benefits of social status in society (Merton, 1968). However, when these high-status actors are associated with norm and moral violations, the favorable effect of achieving high status seems mixed. At times, high status appears to attenuate and at other times intensify the severity of punishment third party observers dole out to these actors. We investigated why the *same* social marker of status yields such disparate reactions and set out to understand and reconcile these contradictory findings.

We hypothesized observers’ judgments will critically depend on the status type associated with high-status actors, specifically whether their status strategy is based on prestige (by gaining others respect and admiration) or dominance (demanding deference by being assertive and controlling). Across six studies (three in the online supplement) that span archival field data, lab experiment, utilizing a real-world event and experimental scenarios, and employing participants from the US and Europe, we consistently illustrate for similar misdeeds, observers levied increasingly graver punishment to leaders who exercise dominance and thus operate in the status currency of control than those who earn their status via prestige. Furthermore, we corroborate our theoretical rationale that observers perceive dominant high-status leaders’ transgression as intentional and grant them less moral credentials. The converse holds for similar misdeeds of prestige based high-status leaders, for observers comprehend their
actions as less intentional, afford them greater moral credentials, and hence levy reduced punishment. We, thus, emphasize how prestige or dominance based status colors observers’ attribution of blame and intentionality differently for similar transgressions where the motivation for such behavior is ambiguous. Conceptualizing and measuring status based on two established avenues through which status is maintained (and perceived), our research offers a more comprehensive and parsimonious account for the significant role status plays in the judgments, decisions, and punishment others direct towards high-status transgressors.

**Theoretical Contributions**

Our research offers several important theoretical contributions. First, building on the two evolutionary strategies for maintaining social status, our set of results provide a theoretically sound explanation for why third-party observers discern transgressions of certain high-status leaders as more offensive than other similarly ranked leaders. In doing so, this work transcends the broad assessment of possessing high versus low status, to emphasize the importance of status strategies focal leaders employ, as a critical factor in shaping observers’ assessment of transgression. Thus, our findings depict important implications for organizations and organizational leaders by highlighting whom among actors with high status remain open to greater risk of suffering the deleterious effect of norm infractions when their culpability proves ambiguous.

Second, discussing two different ways of navigating with social status—prestige and dominance—rather than just evaluating based on overall status, our results bridge theoretically inconsistent findings in the literature. Importantly, we demonstrate intentionality and moral credentials prove not to be two different psychological explanations for the same phenomenon. Specifically, intentionality influences punishment severity for high-status dominance leaders
while moral credentials cushion the impact of ambiguous infringements for high-status prestige leaders. Hence, our research contributes to the growing literature on moral licensing (Effron & Monin, 2010), for it elucidates among other factors, the pivotal role of accrued moral credentials in bailing out those who commit moral transgressions. Therefore, a prestige route to maintaining status better insulates leaders from their alleged transgressions via their accumulated moral credentials and reduced attribution of intentionality.

Third, we find ambiguous transgression – where individual’s motive for engaging in norm violation behavior is unclear – are considered more intentional for dominant actors compared to their prestigious counterparts. Assessment of intentionality further explains harsher punishment doled out to high-status dominant actors. These conclusions contribute to the broader research on retributive justice (Darley & Pittman, 2003) where reactions to wrongdoings by jurors in a courtroom, by employee supervisors, or by the general public rely on intentionality judgments as the proximal driver of punishment severity. Moreover, the harshness of punitive actions towards norm transgressors holds generally in proportion to the magnitude of intent associated with their violations (Carlsmith & Darley, 2008). This further underscores the reason for the great backlash when observers identify similar misdeeds with actors whose status is based on dominance than prestige. Additionally, most of the research on retributive justice has focused on punitive actions based on perceived harm caused to the victim. By demonstrating harsher punishment judgments for actors based on transgressions that mostly benefits the perpetrator without focusing on any particular victim, our findings also add to the scant area of research on retributive justice that upholds societal moral standards.

Fourth, originating from Freeman’s (1984) stakeholder approach to the firm, organizational scholars continue to call for a stakeholder perspective to the governance of firms
and the behaviors of personnel within (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Kochan & Rubinstein, 2000). Our research buttresses the prevailing dialogue by examining transgressions of high-status organizational actors from a third party’s viewpoint; a perspective that “has received relatively little research attention” in organizational research (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004, p. 218). These third party stakeholders remain critical in upholding moral and fairness norms among organizational members and often bear personal cost when enforcing such standards (Skarlicki, Ellard, & Kelln, 1998; Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, & Gee, 2002). More importantly, employing an attributional framework, our research also tested the empirical validity of the theoretical third party justice perceptions model proposed by Skarlicki and Kulik (2004). In line with the articulated model, we reveal the transgressor’s characteristics influence attributions of blame or intentionality of third-party observers, which then mediates the retaliations levied at the transgressor. Moreover, third-party observers by definition were not directly affected by the transgressor’s actions. This in conjunction with attribution of intentionality as the mechanism, suggests not all punitive actions aimed at restoring justice remain based on the dominant narrative of self-interest in dealing with others (cf. Miller, 1999) but can also be guided by safeguarding normative moral standards.

Finally, our findings parallel those of a recent paper that addressed similar firm-level effects (McDonnell & King, 2018). The authors reported prestigious organizations, (i.e. those high on both status and domain-specific reputation) proved less likely to bear the blame for a transgression. They argued positive expectations associated with such firms lead third-party evaluators to assume their behavior to be appropriate when blame failed to be established. Importantly, although theoretically asserted, they failed to measure explicitly positive expectations associated with reputable firms. Our findings not only replicate these findings at the
individual level but also test the mechanism of attributing a smaller amount of blame to prestigious actors’ transgressions based on the evolutionary basis of status. However, McDonnell and King (2018) also substantiated once an organizations’ transgression surfaced, it resulted in severe punishment for prestigious organizations. We delve into this latter finding in the below section.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

A possible limitation of our research remains the focus on high-status actors, despite finding a significant interaction for low-status actors in Study 1. Low-status, high dominant players received significantly more reprimand than low-status, low-dominant players encountered, but subsequent studies failed to explore this facet. Thus, it would be interesting and informative to investigate whether lack of punishment for low-status, high-dominant players compared to low-status, low-dominant players generalizes beyond the NHL. Having said that, the inconsistent findings in the literature dealt mainly with the actions of high-status leaders and given that such leaders generally attract greater attention for their (mis)behaviors, we focused mostly on actions of the high-status actors in comparison to low-ranking actors. Hence, we did not concentrate on factors that could drive the interaction among low-status actors and their dominance level. Therefore, future work evaluating observers’ reaction to transgressions of low-status actors would be helpful in expanding our understanding of the above finding.

Another limitation is our attention on transgressions that generally benefitted the individual rather than benefitting the group. Followers grant individuals who violate norms to benefit others greater influence and leadership roles than those who violate norms for personal gain (Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Blaker, & Heerdink, 2012). The dominant leader’s propensity to engage in forceful actions can also result in benefitting other in-group members
(Halevy et al., 2012). This appears a critical boundary condition to explore for future research, as transgressions aimed at helping others could buffer the impact of third-party punishments towards high-status dominant actors. Moreover, the above prediction remains consistent with extant research on organizational justice that consistently affirms reduced punitive actions for transgressions targeted at benefitting others (Darley & Pittman, 2003).

Our findings indicate the greater the moral credentials conferred to respected others who help, advice, and share valuable information (i.e., prestige leaders), the more it cushions these individuals from observer punishments. A related and parallel literature based on accrued moral credits reflects that of the moral self-licensing effect (Monin & Miller, 2001). The central results from this work pose past moral actions, liberates oneself (i.e., *self-license*) to indulge in less moral deeds. Thus, if a prestigious leader previously commits good-deeds that earns moral credits and certification of having high moral order, it poses the question whether these leaders, as a result of their garnered prestige, prove more vulnerable to indulge in morally questionable behavior in the future. Does the licensing effect drive this heightened potential for transgression? This intriguing possibility warrants future investigation.

Our findings also paint a rosy picture for high-status prestige based leaders, as others pardoned their transgressions more readily. However, it remains plausible there exist situations when observers would reprimand prestige based leaders more than they would castigate their dominant counterparts. This can be especially true when evaluating certain kinds of infractions. Even though we replicated our findings across a range of violations, it remains possible when high-status prestige actors engage in transgressions that prove central to their identity by which they reap their status, they will incur more sanctions. For example, Eliot Spitzer once an acclaimed district attorney of New York City was lauded for and promoted to the position of
Attorney General of New York and later Governor of New York as an appreciation for his
dogged fight against sex trafficking and prostitution. However, once he stood accused of
allegedly soliciting prostitutes, both his supporters and the political elite rendered extreme
criticism and ridicule and forced him towards resignation (Hakim & Santos, 2008). Hence, when
an actor violates the norm on which one’s prestige based status stands reliant, it engenders a
feeling of hypocrisy. Consequently, others meet the violator with harsher judgments in line with
expectancy and stereotype violation theory (Burgoon, 2015; Jussim et al., 1987; Rudman &
Fairchild, 2004). Therefore, hypocrisy penalty can be higher for high-status prestige leaders and
might explain our discontent and visceral reactions towards such people who we initially held in
high esteem but later discover they transgressed the very standards they once championed. The
above proposition remains in line with McDonnell and King’s (2018) firm-level conclusions
where prestigious organizations encounter increased reprimands for transgressions that occurred
in the domain in which their reputation is built on.

Similarly, another relevant literature for future examination represents that of trust repair,
which examines how others react to competence or integrity based transgressions (Kim, Dirks,
Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004). It is plausible high-status prestige
actors compared to their dominant counterparts would be punished equally (or more) for
violating ethical or integrity based trust in their service of in-group members’ interest. Especially
since others expect dominant individuals to engage in such actions; thus, they tolerate it more
compared to high-status prestige actors who they do not anticipate to partake in such behaviors
(Halevy et al., 2012). Hence, it would be informative if future research explores how the nature
of ambiguous transgression may moderate third-party judgments of actors whose status proves
based on dominance or prestige.
Additionally, the identity of the observer vis-à-vis the high-status actor could also moderate the effect of third-party punishment of venerated actors. Extant work illuminates social identity could lead to both an in-group leniency effect, where the colleague receives less harsh punishment (Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000) or the black sheep effect such that the in-group member is severely punished (Marques & Paez, 1994). The research illustrates transgression ambiguity as the moderator in explaining whether in-group leniency or black sheep effect would prevail. It remains therefore, plausible that for transgressions that violate the very stereotype of a dominance or prestige-oriented actor, highly identified third-party observers would punish them more severely for an ambiguous infraction than those who do not identify strongly. Moreover, one should expect the opposite effect if the violation proves unambiguous. This poses an intriguing empirical question and warrants further examination.

**Practical Implications**

These results also hold varying practical implications. First, in an age of hyperactive media, a common challenge for executives remains crisis management (Diermeier, 2011; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Crises continue to range from corporate fraud to allegations of sexual harassment to environmental violations. At any moment, the media can thrust a leader as the face of the organization into the spotlight where the company expects the leader to diffuse the situation. For instance, Tony Hayward, CEO of British Petroleum (BP), cast into the role of representing BP’s oil spill, bore the brunt of the targeted public scorn. Whereas, the court of public opinion forgave and applauded James Burke, CEO of Johnson & Johnson, who exhibited the face of the Tylenol crisis of 1982. Our results suggest leader perceptions may drive this disparity in public reactions. Moreover, because of differences in the level of intentionality and moral credentials others assign to dominant versus prestige leaders, it proves critical for
organizations to evaluate the type of leader they promote. Investors, regulatory bodies, and the public gauge the intentionality and form judgments based on the status currency of the leader who represents the company when a crisis arises.

Our results portray others hold a dominant CEO more accountable for the crisis compared to a prestige based CEO. For instance, the public scrutinized Nike’s employment practices when it emerged some managers behaved in dominant and aggressive manner towards their employees. For instance, several employees fainted when a manager forced them to run multiple laps around the company parameter as punishment for not reaching their production targets. As this news permeated into the media, it led to a sharp drop in sales and Nike’s stock prices plummeted (Saporito, 2001). In these situations, organizations would fare better by disassociating with dominant CEOs or managers to safeguard the firm’s reputation and to prevent defection among partners, clients, and other stakeholders. However, distancing from an accused leader may not always prove a viable option. In such circumstances, organizations should ensure they provide timely and appropriate communication to others explaining their behavior or apologizing for their agent’s conduct. Providing relevant justification or expressing regret for inappropriate conduct reduces backlash against the guilty party (Darley & Pittman, 2003). For example, when a Starbuck’s manager acted prejudicially towards a black customer in their Philadelphia store, its CEO in response to the ensuing backlash, apologized, accepted the fault, voluntarily initiated the largest racial bias training to all its employees across 8,000 stores, and vowed to appraise its impact. The public acknowledged this promise as a positive first step in responding to a misconduct that could have easily derailed the company’s sales and credibility (Salmon, 2018).
Finally, from a policy and legal perspective, these results create a perverse incentive for prestige based leaders. If leaders remain aware of their accumulated prestige, they may be encouraged to hide their misdeeds. Instead of initiating corrective actions, they realize they stand less liable for their actions. This remains an important issue as both these factors, greater incentive to cheat (Harris & Bromiley, 2007) as well as being a member of a prominent and reputable firm have been associated with greater likelihood of violating moral standards (Mishina, Dykes, Block, & Pollock, 2010). Finally, the tendency to levy different intentionality attributions based on the transgressor’s characteristics for similar misdeeds poses a challenge for policymakers, lawyers, and jury members to impart fair impartial punishment and justice to the violators (see Carlsmith & Darly, 2008 for review). It holds imperative that such members take cognizance of these factors before arriving at a verdict.

CONCLUSION

Bill Cosby, despite mounting allegations, continued to receive appreciation, awards and honorary degrees. In contrast, Mike Tyson following his allegations precipitously dropped in fortune and fame, culminating in his filing for bankruptcy in 2003. Our set of studies provides an evidence-based explanation for why two similarly high-status actors, accused of similar misdeeds experienced different trajectories. Additionally, and more importantly, by exploring the status strategy a high-status actor pursues, dominance or prestige, rather than by just evaluating based on overall status (high versus low), our conclusions help theoretically resolve the inconsistency in the literature. In doing so, it advances our theoretical understanding of how the much sought after commodity, status, can act as a premium or liability, to its bearer.
REFERENCES


Karelaia, N., & Keck, S. 2013. When deviant leaders are punished more than non-leaders: The role of deviance severity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(5): 783–796.


### Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-correlations for Study 1

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Notes: N = 1294; a Categorical variable, 1= Right hand and 2= Left hand; b Categorical variable, 1= Central forward, 2=Defense, 3=Left Wing, 4=Right Wing; c Categorical variable representing the year in which player was drafted includes players from 0=1993 to 21=2014; d Categorical variable, 1= 2013-14, 2=2014-15.

*p ≤ 0.05, **p ≤ 0.01, *** p ≤ 0.001
Table 2: Results of Random Coefficient Modelling in Study 1

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Notes: a This comprises of 22 fixed effect for the year in which a player was first drafted in the NHL; b Categorical variable 1=2014-15 season, 1= 2015-16 season; Standard errors in parentheses

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001
Figure 1. Mediation Model in Study 3

Notes: Unstandardized regression coefficients; * Direct effect of IV on DV after accounting for the two indirect effects; 
* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001;
SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

for

Fall from Grace: The Role of Dominance and Prestige in the Punishment of High Status Actors
STUDY S1: EVENT BASED SURVEY STUDY

The aim of this study was twofold. First, we wanted to directly measure the constructs of dominance and prestige. Second and more importantly, we wanted to test whether perceiving the high-status actor as more dominant or more prestigious would influence observers’ punishment recommendations and judgments of intentionality for an ambiguous transgression. We tested this possibility in the real-world context of a high-status soccer player involved in a tax fraud scandal for which his culpability was not yet established. Specifically, we presented participants with an actual news report of Lionel Messi being accused of tax embezzlement. However, his guilt was not clear as Lionel Messi repudiated the accusation. Furthermore, the courts had not reached a verdict, but had only agreed to pursue a legal case on the matter. Therefore, it was important for us to complete the study prior to the courts arriving at a verdict, to maintain ambiguity of guilt. This incident, in the summer of 2015, served as a naturally occurring event to test our predictions. Consistent with our theorizing, we hypothesized that observers’ judgment of the transgression would depend upon Lionel Messi being perceived as high on dominance or prestige.

Sample and Procedure

Participants. We recruited 94 participants for a 10-minute study from the behavioral lab of a European business school, in exchange for £2.00 (approximately US $3.00) participation payment. We removed one participant who mistakenly completed the study twice. The final sample consisted of 93 participants (46% female; \( M = 29.15 \) years, \( SD = 9.95 \)).

Procedure. Prior to the study, we screened participants for basic knowledge of soccer, to ensure study responses were not a result of guesses to a forced response scale. Participants were
shown an image of Lionel Messi – arguably the most elite and recognizable soccer player in the world – in a tuxedo to conceal his sports identity. They were asked to identify the celebrity from six options; those who failed to identify the image correctly were not allowed to continue with the study. To limit the possibility that their first response was correct due to chance (1 in 6), we posed a second question where participants were asked to identify the soccer club he plays for. Those who failed the second screening question were not permitted to continue with the study. This ensured the likelihood that a participant advanced due to chance was less than 3%.

Successful participants then rated Lionel Messi’s perceived levels of dominance and prestige. Next, they were shown the original clippings from popular news journals (e.g. BBC, Forbes, CNN, etc.) informing that Lionel Messi would be facing trial over an alleged £2.9 million (approx. US $4.38 million) tax fraud. They were also shown clippings from similar news journals where Lionel Messi vehemently denied these allegations. Taken together, these news clippings add ambiguity to the transgression. Following this, participants evaluated Lionel Messi’s transgression and reported their demographic information.

**Measures**

Responses were on a 7-point Likert scale with anchors 1=not at all and 7=very much.

Dominance and prestige. We assessed the perceived levels of dominance and prestige using a 13-item validated scale (Cheng et al., 2010). A sample item for dominance is “He often

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8 When this study was designed, Messi had won the footballer of the year award – FIFA Ballon d’Or, a record four times and was ranked as the 4th highest paid sports athlete in the world by Forbes, ahead of other phenomenal athletes such as Kobe Bryant, Roger Federer, etc. In essence, he had various markers of a high status sports athlete.

9 We used a shorter version of the original 17-item scale, after running a pre-test on all items and incorporating only those that showed high factor scores. The original scale was designed to rate known others who are part of one’s group. Since this study involved an unknown third person, it was necessary to conduct a pre-test on the scale items.
tries to get his own way regardless of what others in the team may want”. A sample prestige item is “Other members of the team respect and admire him” ($\alpha_{\text{Dominance}} = .74$, $\alpha_{\text{Prestige}} = .68$).

Intentionality. We assessed participants’ ratings of the transgression due to an intentional act by responding to a single item, “How likely is it that this was a deliberate action by Messi”.

Punishment. Since this study involved an actual ongoing trial, we measured punishment using a proxy – perceptions of culpability. We asked participants “How likely is it that Lionel Messi engaged in tax fraud?” and “How likely is it that the court will find Messi guilty” ($\alpha=.71$). We reasoned that opinions about engaging or being found guilty of a transgression should result in corresponding punishment recommendations for such individuals.

Control Variables. We controlled for several factors that could influence our results, such as amount of time participants spent following European soccer, how much they liked Lionel Messi and the football club he represents. We also controlled for demographics of all participants as these variables might influence the time devoted to following soccer and thus impact participants’ transgression judgments. Please refer to Table S2 for descriptive statistics.

Results

------Insert Table S2 and Table S3 here------

Table S3 describes regression results. We found that dominance positively predicted participant’s punishment judgments ($b = .43$, $p = .002$, Model 2) even after controlling for a number of variables ($b = .54$, $p = .001$, Model 3) whereas prestige was marginally negatively correlated with participants’ punishment judgments without the control variables ($b = -.38$, $p = .055$, Model 2) and significantly after accounting for control variables ($b = -.51$, $p = .031$, Model 3). Similarly, we find dominance positively correlated with intentionality both with ($b = .53$, $p = .002$, Model 6) and without ($b = .53$, $p = .001$, Model 5) controls, whereas prestige was unrelated.
to intentionality. These set of results support our first two hypotheses that high status dominance actors are punished more harshly than high status prestige actors (H1). Additionally, we also checked for the interaction effect of dominance and prestige on punishment and found no support for the interaction ($b = .008, p = .98$). Moreover, when Messi was considered high on dominance, the transgression was judged as more intentional (H2). To test hypothesis 3, we performed a mediation analysis using bootstrap procedure to assess the size of the indirect effect from dominance via intentionality (mediator) on punishment judgments. We also added prestige as a covariate. Confirming our hypothesis, the indirect effect was positive and significant ($b = .18, p = .018$) with 95% bias corrected confidence intervals not containing zero [.06, .35]. After accounting for the indirect effect, the direct effect of dominance on punishment was only marginally significant ($b = .25, p = .079$), thus supporting hypothesis 3. The indirect effect of dominance on punishment via intentionality was also significant even without controlling for prestige ($b = .19, p = .014$, 95% CI [.07, .38]).

**Discussion**

By utilizing a timely, relevant, naturally occurring real world event, we found further evidence in support of our hypotheses. The more participants perceived Lionel Messi as dominant, the more they judged the ambiguous tax fraud as intentional and recommended harsher punishment. In contrast, when participants perceived Lionel Messi as high on prestige, they were less likely to punish him. These results thus provide important evidence that the type of status strategy – dominance or prestige, that other infer one engages in, differentially colors third party judgments of high status actor’s moral transgressions. Despite being careful with our study design, all our data came from a single source thus making it susceptible to common source bias. Also, despite controlling for a number of factors, one cannot completely rule out
preexisting knowledge of the income tax allegations against Messi among participants which could potentially influence our results. To overcome these issues of causality, we manipulated both dominance and prestige in Study 2 and 3 (see main manuscript).

**STUDY S2: RULING OUT LIKEABILITY**

The aim of Study S2 was to replicate the findings from other studies in a controlled experiment while ruling out possible alternative accounts for our prior findings. To achieve this, we experimentally manipulated the actor’s level of dominance and prestige to establish the causal role of dominance versus prestige in punishing high status transgressors. Moreover, we orthogonally manipulated the actor’s warmth in order to rule out the possibility that liking the transgressing high status actor would moderate observers’ punishment judgments. Indeed, existing research using the dominance and prestige framework has shown that high-status prestige actors are liked more than high-status dominant actors (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010) and because interpersonal liking has been shown to attenuate punishment judgments (Efran, 1974) and harsh interpersonal reactions (Epstein & Hornstein, 1969), we experimentally manipulated the actor’s level of warmth as a proximal indicator of interpersonal liking. This was done to meet the primary objective of demonstrating that dominance and prestige effects exist beyond attributions of likeability. It is important to note that not all high-status dominant actors are perceived as unlikeable, for instance high-status individuals who show their dominance via power are perceived as more warm than those lacking power (Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011). Anecdotally we know that certain CEOs despite showing autocratic tendencies are still liked. For instance Bill Gates was known to lead through control (Wallace & Erickson, 1993) but was regularly ranked within Fortune’s top 10 most admired business leaders. Hence, we do not
expect warmth or likeability to influence punishment judgments, of high-status actors operating with dominance or prestige strategies.

We also measured participants’ perception of the actor’s competence to make sure that competence did not differ across the two conditions, as competence is often linked with high status (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Bunderson, 2003). Finally, we also measured observers’ reports on how harshly the high-status transgressor should be punished. We expected that ambiguous transgressions committed by dominance- compared to prestige-based high-status actors would be judged more harshly. Further, we predicted that the level of the actor’s warmth would be unrelated to observers’ judgments of punishment severity. Finally, despite status and specifically dominance-based status being conceptually different from the construct of power (see Cheng et. al., 2013), we measured participants’ ratings of both power and status, to statistically rule out power as a potential alternative explanation.

Method

Manipulation pretest. We ran a pretest on 50 participants sampled from Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) (44% female; $M$ age = 33.8 years, $SD = 7.66$) to ensure our manipulation mirrored the validated operationalization of dominance and prestige. Participants were randomly assigned to either a prestige-based ($n=25$) or a dominance-based status actor condition ($n=25$). In the prestige condition, they read about a high-status individual who was “respected, admired and held in high esteem”. In the dominance condition, the same high-status individual was described as having a “dominant personality who is forceful and controlling”. Participants then responded to the validated scale measures of dominance and prestige similar to Study 2 (see Cheng et al., 2010) and reported their perceived level of the actor’s power and status respectively. A one-way ANOVA demonstrated that participants in the prestige condition
rated this individual significantly higher on prestige compared to those in the dominance condition \( (F(1,48) = 24.16, p < .001, M_{\text{Prestige}} = 5.22, SD_{\text{Prestige}} = .81, M_{\text{Dominance}} = 3.89, SD_{\text{Dominance}} = 1.09, d = 1.38). \) Similarly, participants assigned to the dominance condition, rated this person as significantly higher on dominance than participants in the prestige condition \( (F(1,48) = 29.04, p < .001, M_{\text{Prestige}} = 4.02, SD_{\text{Prestige}} = 1.16, M_{\text{Dominance}} = 5.74, SD_{\text{Dominance}} = 1.10, d = 1.52). \) Further, there was no difference in the mean levels of perceived power \( (F(1,48) = .24, p = .63) \) and overall status \( (F(1,48) = .31, p = .58) \) ratings, ensuring our experimental paradigm successfully manipulated dominance and prestige, without impacting the related concept of power.

Participants. Study S2 used a more representative sample of participants from a different country. We sampled U.S. participants from AMT. We decided in advance to collect approximately 50 participants per cell and paid $0.50 for their participation. Our final sample consisted of 204 valid responses after removing 6 participants that failed attention checks (43% female; \( M \) age = 34.24 years, \( SD = 10.94). \)

Design and Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (status actor: dominance \( (n=100) \) versus prestige \( (n=104) \)) X 2 (actor warmth: high \( (n=99) \) versus low \( (n=105) \)) between-subject design. Participants read about a high status individual K Wallace, who was described as the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. In the dominance status condition, participants read that he was known to be dominant and controlling with his colleagues. In the prestige status condition, he was described as being respected and admired by his colleagues. In the high warmth condition, K Wallace was also described as caring and openhearted, whereas in the low warmth condition, he was additionally described as withdrawn and reserved\(^{10}\). In line with recent findings that discussed warmth to consist of both social and ethical components

\(^{10}\) A pretest was done to ensure that items selected for the warmth manipulation displayed considerable discriminant validity with the prestige and dominance items.
(Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014), we ensured that our manipulation of warmth was not conflated with the ethical component. We did this as theoretical explanation for our effects centered on judgments of morality via intentionality and moral credentials, and therefore it was important for our manipulation to be independent of this component of warmth. Following this, participants read about an ambiguous transgression K Wallace was accused of, however, due to lack of evidence, charges were not yet pressed against him. This scenario was directly adapted from the work of Fragale and colleagues (2009):

_Recently, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) accused K. Wallace of underpaying the federal government on his personal income taxes. Over the past few years, federal tax laws have become increasingly complex, and there are now more rules and regulations than ever before. Over this same period of time, the IRS has documented a substantial rise in improper tax returns. Some are a result of simple mistakes, while others are deliberate attempts to pay lower taxes. Although official charges have not been filed against K. Wallace, the IRS alleges that K. Wallace’s tax return understated the amount of money that he owed to the federal government._

Participants then responded to the following punishment items “How harshly would you punish K. Wallace for his behavior?” and “How strongly do you feel that tax authorities (IRS) should file a case against K. Wallace?” (α = .83). To ensure that differential competence perceptions of K Wallace across conditions were not driving the results, we also measured competence using participants’ perception of the actor’s confidence and competence (Fiske et al., 2002) (α = .85). Finally, participants also responded to manipulation check items aimed at assessing their liking of K. Wallace (α = .88). All responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale (1=not at all, 7 = very much).
Results

Manipulation check. In line with past research (e.g. Cheng et al., 2010), a 2 (Status Actor Condition) x 2 (Actor Warmth Condition) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of status ($F(1, 200) = 44.24, p < .001$) and warmth manipulation ($F(1, 200) = 121.73, p < .001$). Participants reported greater liking for K. Wallace in the prestige status condition ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.21$) than in the dominance status condition ($M = 3.63, SD = 1.11, F(1,202) = 28.90, p < .001$). We also found that K. Wallace was judged as significantly more likeable in the high ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.03$) than low warmth condition ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.01, F(1,202) = 101.55, p < .001$), indicating that our experimental manipulation of warmth was successful. However, more importantly we did not find any interaction effect of the two conditions on perceived warmth ($F(1, 200) = 0.31, p = .58$).

Punishment severity. A 2 (Status Actor Condition) x 2 (Actor Warmth Condition) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of status condition, $F(1, 200) = 9.08, p = .003, d = .43$, such that participants in the dominance status condition ($M = 4.09, SD = 1.46$) were recommended harsher punishment for K. Wallace than participants in the prestige status condition ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.36$). In contrast, there was no main effect of warmth on punishment severity ($M_{High\text{Warmth}} = 3.67, SD = 1.44$, and $M_{Low\text{Warmth}} = 3.88, SD = 1.44$ respectively), $F(1, 200) = 1.05, p = .31$, suggesting that liking did not change judgments of punishment severity. Further, we did not observe any interaction effect of the actor’s warmth and status on punishment severity, $F(1, 200) = 0.00, p = .99$. Neither participants’ age nor gender moderated their judgments of punishment severity ($p > .10$).

Perceived competence. In line with the stereotype content model of warmth and competence as two primary dimensions of evaluations (Fiske et. al., 2002), we also measured.
participants’ competence perceptions for K Wallace to further rule this out as an alternate mechanism. We did not observe any difference in competence ratings across high ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 0.95$) and low warmth actor conditions ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.20$), $F(1,200) = 2.12$, $p = .15$; neither was there any difference in competence ratings across the prestige ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.01$) and dominance status conditions ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.17$), $F(1,200) = 0.62$, $p = .43$, nor was there any interaction between the two conditions, $F(1,200) = 1.07$, $p = .30$, confirming that participant’s judged K. Wallace equally competent across conditions.

**Discussion**

Study S2 replicated the findings from previous studies using an experimental design. More importantly, by experimentally manipulating dominance and prestige, Study 4 provided evidence for the causal role that dominance versus prestige based status plays for judgments of transgressions and the severity of punishment. Study 4 also ruled out several alternate explanations, such as observers’ differential liking, ratings of competence, and perceived differences in power of the transgressor, that could have driven our findings. Finally, Study S2 directly captured participants’ recommendation of punishment severity and demonstrated that when accused of transgressing social norms, the CEO (high status actor) when high on dominance-based status was recommended harsher punishment compared to when his status was based on prestige.

**STUDY S3: TESTING THE COMPLETE MODEL**

Study S3 was performed to replicate the complete theoretical model i.e. our findings in Study 3, illustrating the psychological process that underlies observers’ punishment judgments. Specifically, we focused on the role of attributions of moral credentials (Polman, Pettit, &
Wiesenfeld, 2013) and intentionality (Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009) as two separate psychological mechanisms driving third party judgments. We also wanted to rule out transgressor’s gender as an alternate mechanism driving our effects.

**Method**

Participants. As before, we decided in advance to collect 50 participants per condition. Our final sample consisted of 106 MTurk users, who were each paid $0.50 for their participation (38% female; $M_{age}$ = 33.53 years, $SD = 11.25$).

Design and Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to either a high status prestige ($n = 53$) or high status dominance ($n = 53$) condition. The manipulation and scenario were identical to Study 3, except that the transgressor in this study was a female – Ms. Wallace. This was done to generalize our previous results across gender. After reading the scenario, participants reported how severely the high status transgressor should be punished using the same items as in Study 3 ($\alpha = .88$). We measured participants’ attributions of intentionality, by asking how strongly they felt that Ms. Wallace deliberately underpaid federal government on her personal income taxes (cf. Fragale et al., 2009). Participants’ perception of Ms. Wallace’s moral credentials were measured using a composite of three items assessing how moral, wrong and unethical her behavior was ($\alpha = .83$) (cf. Polman et al., 2013). As power and status are closely related constructs, we also wanted to rule out any status and power differences across the two conditions. Therefore, participants reported how much status and power Ms. Wallace had. Finally, participants responded to manipulation check items assessing the actor’s perceived levels of prestige and dominance. All responses were made along 7-point Likert scales ($1 = not at all, 7 = very much$)
Results

Manipulation Check. A one-way ANOVA confirmed that our manipulation worked as expected. Participants assigned to the high-status prestige actor condition reported Ms. Wallace as being higher in prestige ($M = 5.52, SD = 1.44$) compared to the participants assigned to the high-status dominance condition ($M = 3.50, SD = 1.31, F(1,104) = 57.36, p < .001$). In contrast, participants assigned to the high-status dominance actor condition indicated Ms. Wallace to be higher in dominance ($M = 5.49, SD = 1.16$) than participants assigned to the high-status prestige condition ($M = 3.04, SD = 1.01, F(1,104) = 128.60, p < .001$).

Punishment severity. A one-way ANOVA revealed significant mean difference in punishment severity ($F(1, 104) = 10.29, p = .002, d = 0.62$), such that Ms. Wallace was punished more severely when described as a high-status dominant actor ($M = 3.69, SD = 1.45$) than when described as a high-status prestigious actor ($M = 2.80, SD = 1.40$), supporting hypothesis 1.

Intentionality. In support of hypothesis 2, Ms. Wallace’s behavior was judged as more intentional in the dominance-based status condition ($M = 4.40, SD = 1.74$) compared to the prestige-based status condition ($M = 2.76, SD = 1.51, F(1,104) = 27.05, p < .001, d = 1.01$).

Moral credentials. Ms. Wallace’s behavior was perceived as less unethical in the prestige-based status condition ($M = 4.19, SD = 1.40$) compared to the dominance-based status condition ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.20, F(1,104) = 10.01, p = .002, d = 0.61$). Thus, consistent with hypothesis 3, Ms. Wallace was afforded greater moral credentials when judged to be prestigious than dominant.

Mediation analysis. To check whether intentionality and moral credentials explained the relationship between status condition (dominance =1, prestige = 0) and punishment, we performed bootstrap mediation analyses with intentionality and moral credentials as two parallel
mediators and punishment as the dependent variable (see Figure S6). A significant indirect effect of dominance compared to prestige via intentionality on punishment was observed ($b = .62, p < .001$) with 95% confidence intervals not containing zero [.34, 1.02]. Further, in comparison to prestige, indirect effect of dominance on punishment via lack of moral credentials was also significant ($b = .37, p = .006, 95\%CI [.15, .68]$). Overall the total effect of dominance on punishment was significant in comparison to prestige ($b = 1.00, p < .001, 95\%CI [.55, 1.50]$), thus supporting Hypothesis 4 (see Figure S4). Overall, we replicated findings from Study 3 (see main manuscript) and found support for all the four hypotheses.

Testing for the impact of participants’ age and gender. We did not observe any main or interaction effects of gender or age on intentionality, moral credentials and punishment severity ($p > .10$).

Testing for impact of perceived levels of status and power. We also found no difference in status ($M_{\text{Prestige}} = 5.49, SD_{\text{Prestige}} = 1.34, M_{\text{Dominance}} = 5.10, SD_{\text{Dominance}} = 1.21, F(1,104) = 2.55, p = .11$) and power ($M_{\text{Prestige}} = 5.11, SD_{\text{Prestige}} = 1.45, M_{\text{Dominance}} = 5.55, SD_{\text{Dominance}} = 1.20, F(1,104) = 2.80, p = .10$) across the two experimental conditions.

**Discussion**

Overall, this study provided a complete test of our model. Specifically, we found that third party observers recommended harsher punishment for a CEO high on dominance than prestige in response to their ambiguous moral transgressions, replicating results from Studies 1, 2, 3, S1 and S2. Moreover, judgments of intentionality and moral credentials, as hypothesized, were found to explain the differential punishments meted out to dominance versus prestige-based high-status actors. Finally, this study also helped to rule out additional alternate mechanisms of power and transgressor’s gender that may influence the results.
# TABLES AND FIGURES

Table S1. *Multilevel regression on punishment towards group leader in Study 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status Strategy (Dominance/Prestige)*</td>
<td>0.258*</td>
<td>0.316*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.117)</td>
<td>(0.123)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.253*</td>
<td>0.263*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.119)</td>
<td>(0.117)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-0.0005</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0047)</td>
<td>(0.0046)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>-0.0181</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0355)</td>
<td>(0.0350)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Group Members</td>
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<td>-0.0634</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0636)</td>
<td>(0.0634)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.417***</td>
<td>1.603***</td>
<td>1.538***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.386)</td>
<td>(0.0844)</td>
<td>(0.379)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| $N$                               | 152     | 152     | 152     |
| $R^2$ (Level 1)                   | 0.029   | 0.031   | 0.070   |
| $R^2$ (Level 2)                   | -0.009  | 0.033   | 0.072   |

Notes: * Categorical variable with 1 as Dominance and 0 as Prestige; Number of Groups = 38; Standard errors in parentheses
  
  * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
Table S2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-correlations for Study S1

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<tr>
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<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Age</td>
<td>29.15</td>
<td>9.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Gender(^a)</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Follow Soccer</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.4***</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Favorite Sport</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.34***</td>
<td>0.65***</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Like &quot;Messi&quot;</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>0.09</td>
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<td>0.44***</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Favorite Soccer Club</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>1.58</td>
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<td>0.37***</td>
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<td>0.61***</td>
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<td>7 Prestige</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.34***</td>
<td>0.4***</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
<td>0.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Dominance</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.29**</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Intentional</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.3**</td>
<td>-0.26*</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Punishment</td>
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<td>1.29</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.21*</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>0.46***</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: \(N = 93; \) \(^a\) Gender: 1 = Male, 2 = Female; \(^p \leq 0.1, \) \(^**p \leq 0.05, \) \(^***p \leq 0.01\)
Table S3: Results of OLS Regression in Study S1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>PUNISHMENT</th>
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<th></th>
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<th>INTENTIONAL</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Model 5</td>
<td>Model 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prestige</td>
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<td>-0.514</td>
<td>-0.356</td>
<td>-0.257</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.198)</td>
<td>(0.234)</td>
<td>(0.220)</td>
<td>(0.260)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>0.426</td>
<td>0.544</td>
<td>0.534</td>
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<td>0.528</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.134)</td>
<td>(0.152)</td>
<td>(0.149)</td>
<td>(0.169)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>-0.007</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.168</td>
<td>0.220</td>
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<td>0.103</td>
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<td>(0.131)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Favorite Sport</td>
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<td>(0.091)</td>
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<td>Like “Messi”</td>
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<td>(0.101)</td>
<td>(0.107)</td>
<td>(0.113)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Favorite Soccer Club</td>
<td>-0.098</td>
<td>-0.184</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.114)</td>
<td>(0.107)</td>
<td>(0.122)</td>
<td>(0.118)</td>
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<td>(1.733)</td>
<td>(0.909)</td>
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<td>(1.926)</td>
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</table>

N: 93; \( R^2 \): .022; \( \Delta R^2 \): .119

Notes: 'v' denotes p value = .055; * Obtained after subtracting \( R^2 \) from Model 1 \( R^2 \); Standard errors in parentheses; * \( p < 0.05 \), ** \( p < 0.01 \), *** \( p < 0.001 \)
Figure S1. Interaction effect of generalized dominance and status on punishment in Study 1

Notes: Both slopes are significant (p<.05)
Figure S2. Interaction effect of prestige and status on punishment in Study 1

Notes: Only slope with high status is significant (p<.05)
Participants first performed Lost at Sea task individually
They then performed the same Lost at Sea task as a group
Filler task (Dot estimation)
Learned about the economic game between group leader and other participant
Paired with group leader for the general ability task
  • Assigned hard questions to the group leader
  • Responded to manipulation check and demographic items
Debriefed, paid and thanked for their participation

Figure S3. Schematic diagram of Study 2’s protocol
Figure S4. Mediation Model in Study S3

Notes: Unstandardized regression coefficients, Direct effect of IV on DV after accounting for the two indirect effects is included in parentheses.
* p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001;
APPENDIX

Graphics used in Study S1

Figure S5. Picture of Lionel Messi used to screen participants with Soccer knowledge in Study S1
Figure S6. *Newspaper Clippings showing Messi being accused of tax fraud in Study S1*
Figure S7. Newspaper Clippings showing Messi denying tax fraud used in Study S1
REFERENCES


