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The Higher They Are, The Harder They Fall: The Effects of Wrongdoer Status on Observer Punishment Recommendations and Intentionality Attributions

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Abstract

In two studies, we explore whether the status of a wrongdoer affects observers’ attributions for the wrongdoer’s actions and opinions about the wrongdoer’s deserved punishment. We find that observers attribute greater intentionality to the actions of high status wrongdoers than the identical actions of low status wrongdoers, and consequently recommend more severe punishments for the former than the latter. Additionally, we find that the relationship between a wrongdoer’s status and observers’ attributions is driven by observers’ perceptions of the wrongdoer’s underlying social motives: High status wrongdoers are presumed to be more interested in their own welfare (self-concerned), and less interested in the welfare of others (other-concerned), than low status individuals. These findings have implications for the psychology of retributive justice, and suggest that punitive reactions may be influenced as much by characteristics of the criminal as they are by characteristics of the crime.

Keywords: Social Status, Wrongdoers, Wrongdoings, Transgressions, Attributions, Intentionality, Retribution, Retributive Justice, Punishment
The Higher They Are, The Harder They Fall: The Effects of Wrongdoer Status on Observer Punishment Recommendations and Intentionality Attributions

From Michael Milken to Martha Stewart, media reports of corporate scandals abound. Usually, the media spotlight falls on the most prominent and high ranking corporate officers, such as Kenneth Lay of Enron and Bernie Ebbers of WorldCom, who are often accused of committing transgressions for their own benefit. Assigning blame in these situations is often complicated, however, by the fact that there are likely to be conflicting accounts of the alleged wrongdoer’s behavior, resulting in ambiguity about what the accused did, what they knew, and whether or not they acted with intention. Consequently, in courts of law and courts of public opinion, individuals are frequently left to make their own attributions about the causes of an alleged wrongdoer’s behavior. These attributions made by observers are important, as they are likely to influence observers’ attitudes toward the wrongdoer, as well as their opinions about the appropriate punishment the wrongdoer should receive (e.g., Darley & Pittman, 2003; Feather, 1996; Miller & Vidmar, 1981).

Although no two corporate scandals are the same, a common factor uniting the various organizational wrongdoings reported in the media is that the perpetrator is generally a high status individual; that is, a person who is respected, valued, and highly regarded by others. Obviously, high status wrongdoers are treated differently than low status wrongdoers, in that the former are likely to generate more widespread media coverage and public interest than the latter. However, it is important to consider whether the status of an accused wrongdoer might affect observers’ substantive judgments about the wrongdoer’s actions. For example, in comparison to low status individuals committing an identical crime, do observers let high status individuals “get off scott-free,” by making more benevolent attributions about the causes of their actions and punishing
them less severely? Or, alternatively, might observers “throw the book” at high status individuals, attributing greater intentionality to their transgressions and recommending more stringent punitive actions?

The current research attempts to shed some light on these questions by examining whether a wrongdoer’s status affects observers’ attributions about the causes of the wrongdoer’s actions. Like many of the incidents reported in the popular press, we focus on situations in which there are multiple plausible explanations of varying intentionality for a wrongdoer’s actions, and examine whether the wrongdoer’s status affects the explanation that observers deem most likely. We also investigate how these attributions influence the severity of the punishments recommended by observers.

This research contributes to a broader program of study concerning the psychology of retributive justice (e.g., Darley & Pittman, 2003; Feather, 1999; Miller & Vidmar, 1981). Similar to prior research in this domain, we focus on the reactions of lay observers to a wrongdoer’s behavior. These beliefs of lay persons have theoretical significance, as they help us to understand how everyday individuals perceive and react to the transgressions of others, but they have practical significance as well. In organizational contexts, supervisors are often charged with selecting, and executing, the appropriate punishments for the wrongdoings of their subordinates. Similarly, lay persons, in the form of juries, are given legal standing to deliver verdicts and recommend punishments for accused wrongdoers. Many prior empirical studies have focused on elucidating whether characteristics of the crime, such as the seriousness of the offense (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Feather, 1996; Walster, 1966), the severity of the consequences (Rosen & Jerdee, 1974; Shaver, 1970), or the difficulty of detecting the crime (Carlsmith et al., 2002), affect observers’ reactions to the perpetrator. Other studies have
investigated whether characteristics of the *criminal*, such as the wrongdoer’s history of transgressions (Ebbessen & Konecni, 1975; Carroll & Payne, 1977), or the wrongdoer’s reasons for committing the transgression (Savitsy & Bab, 1976) influence observers’ reactions. In this vein, we also focus on attributes of the criminal, but explore the impact of a social characteristic, the wrongdoer’s status, on observers’ attributions and punishment recommendations, holding characteristics of the crime constant. Thus, our studies are designed to complement and extend existing knowledge about how individuals make sense of the behavior of the accused.

**Attributions of Intentionality for Wrongdoers’ Actions**

Although the specifics of observers’ attributions for a wrongdoer’s behavior may be idiosyncratic to the situation in question, a fundamental dimension on which attributions differ is their presumed level of *intentionality*. Intentionality refers to an individual’s desires, beliefs, intentions, awareness, and abilities perform a particular action (Malle & Knobe, 1997; Malle & Nelson, 2003). An act is defined as intentional if the actor set out to produce the action and was able to do so. Intentionality is of particular interest in the current research because it is a central construct in research on retributive justice, as attributions of intentionality have been shown to be a key determinant of punishment recommendations: Generally speaking, the greater a wrongdoer’s presumed intentionality, the more the wrongdoer is viewed by others as responsible for the consequences of his or her actions, and the more severe the punishment recommended by observers (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Feather, 1996; Kleinke, Wallis, & Stalder, 2001; Weiner, 1996). In this sense, the greater the intentionality attributed to a wrongdoer’s behavior, the more malevolent the explanation for his or her actions.

Like many of the organizational transgressions reported in the popular press, our focus is on situations in which there are multiple plausible attributions for a wrongdoer’s behavior that
vary in their levels of intentionality. For example, consider a situation in which an individual is accused of insider trading. Observers would attribute a low level of intentionality to the individual’s behavior if they believed that the individual unknowingly transgressed because he or she wasn’t aware of the laws prohibiting this type of action, or perhaps did not realize that the information he or she received was not publicly available. This same transgression may result in an attribution of greater intentionality, however, if observers believed that the individual was fully aware that his or her actions were illegal and decided to trade on the insider information anyway.

The Effects of Wrongdoer Status on Intentionality Attributions and Punishment Recommendations

Consistent with prior psychological and organizational research (e.g., Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006; Emerson, 1962; Fragale, 2006; Tiedens, 2001), we conceptualize status as a subjective evaluation of an individual’s standing relative to others, rather than an objective characteristic. In other words, status is defined in terms of one’s socially ascribed value and worth, so one can only possess as much status as others are willing to grant. However, observers often base their assessments of an individual’s status, in whole or in part, on observable and objective qualities of the individual, referred to as status characteristics (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Webster & Driskell, 1978; Webster & Foschi, 1988; Webster & Hysom, 1998). Ascribed characteristics (e.g., race, gender), achieved characteristics (e.g., education, occupation), and observed behaviors (e.g., one’s manner of speaking, style of dress), are frequently used by observers as cues to determine how much status an individual does, or should, have. Thus, these characteristics and behaviors are not equivalent to status, but they are often, particularly in situations where one is evaluating
persons previously unknown to them (Webster & Driskell, 1978), important markers and
determinants of status. In the present studies, we focus on status differences between individuals
arising from either their ascribed or achieved characteristics.

Once determined, an individual’s level of status provides important contextual
information that observers use to make judgments about the individual. For example, an
individual’s status affects inferences about the individual’s personality (Conway, Pizzamiglio, &
Mount, 1996; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Sande, Ellard, & Ross, 1986), emotional
responses (Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000), and expected task performance (e.g.,
Ridgeway, 1987). It follows, then, that an individual’s status might also affect how observers
make sense of the individual’s transgressions. That is, when there are multiple plausible
explanations for an individual’s actions of differing levels of intentionality, the individual’s
status level might affect which explanation observers find most likely. Although high status is
associated with greater benefits than low status in many domains, such as better physical and
mental health (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Gilbert, 1992; Stansfield & Marmot,
1992), better pay (Judge & Cable, 2004), and greater decision authority and “air time” in work
groups (Bales, 1950; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980), we suggest that high status is
actually a liability when it comes to intentionality attributions and punishments for
transgressions. Specifically, for a given wrongdoing, we contend that observers are likely to
attribute greater intentionality to the actions of high status individuals than low status
individuals. As a result of these attributions, observers will recommend more severe
punishments for high, as opposed to low, status individuals.

These predictions derive from research indicating that individuals’ status positions are
associated with stereotypes about the individuals’ fundamental social motives. Research from
several domains, including interpersonal circumplex models, stereotype content, and negotiation, has demonstrated that individuals organize their perceptions of others around two orthogonal social motive dimensions (Asch, 1946; Bakan, 1966; Carson, 1969; De Dreu, 2006; Fiske et al., 2002; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Kiesler, 1983; Leary, 1957; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Wiggins, 1979). Although the names of the dimensions vary across literatures, there is general consensus that the vertical dimension measures an individual’s desire to advance his or her own interests in life (encompassing characteristics such as dominance, ambition, confidence, and independence), and the horizontal dimension measures an individual’s desire for affiliation with, and concern for, others (encompassing characteristics such as warmth, sincerity, good-naturedness, and tolerance). Thus, broadly speaking, these dimensions assess an individual’s concern for self and concern for others, respectively. On average, high status individuals are stereotyped as more “self-concerned”, and less “other concerned”, than low status individuals; that is, high status individuals are seen as more ambitious, confident, and dominant than low status individuals, but also less warm, sincere, and good-natured. This relationship between status and social motive stereotypes has been replicated in many prior studies using several different status manipulations, such as social categories (e.g., rich people, Asians, housewives, elderly people; Fiske et al., 2002), occupations (e.g., stockbroker, surgeon, legal clerk, telephone operator; Conway et al., 1996), and even members of fictional societies (e.g., the Bwisi and the Mwangai; Conway et al., 1996). Although one’s level status may arise from a multitude of different sources, such as one’s group memberships, occupations, or communication behaviors, the social motive stereotypes associated with status appear to be quite robust and affected more by the magnitude of one’s status than the source.
We suggest that these stereotypes about the social motives of high and low status individuals will be used by observers to make attributions for the actions of wrongdoers. When encountering an individual accused of a transgression, observers are likely to base their attributions for the individual’s actions on their assessments of the individual’s underlying motives (i.e., their evaluations of the individual’s self- and other-concern). In other words, to form a judgment about the causes of a wrongdoer’s behavior, observers first ask themselves, “What kind of person is this?” We predict that self-concern should be positively associated with attributions of intentionality for wrongdoings: The more an individual is perceived to care about his or her own benefit, the more plausible it is that he or she deliberately transgressed in an effort to maximize personal gain. Conversely, we propose that other-concern should be negatively associated with attributions of intentionality: The more an individual is perceived to care about the welfare of others, the less plausible it is that the individual would knowingly cheat or harm others, and thus the more conceivable it is that the individual transgressed inadvertently. As high status individuals are stereotyped as more self-concerned, and less other-concerned, than low status individuals, this leads to the prediction that observers should attribute greater intentionality to the actions of high status wrongdoers than the actions of low status wrongdoers. Consequently, as attributions of greater intentionality have been shown to lead to more severe punishments (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Feather, 1996; Kleinke et al., 2001; Weiner, 1996), these differences in intentionality attributions for the actions of high and low status wrongdoers should lead to corresponding differences in punishment recommendations. In other words, holding the characteristics of the crime constant, high status individuals should be punished more than low status individuals, and these differences in punishment should be mediated by differences in observers’ intentionality attributions for the individuals’ actions. Stated formally:
Hypothesis 1: For the identical wrongdoing, observers will recommend more severe punishments for high status individuals than low status individuals.

Hypothesis 2: For a given transgression, observers will attribute greater intentionality to the actions of high status wrongdoers than low status wrongdoers.

Hypothesis 3: The greater the attributions of intentionality for a wrongdoer’s behavior, the more severe the punishment recommended by observers.

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between a wrongdoer’s status and the severity of observers’ punishment recommendations for the wrongdoer will be mediated by observers’ attributions of the wrongdoer’s intentionality.

The causal model resulting from these hypotheses is illustrated graphically in Figure 1a.

Study 1

Study 1 was designed to test the above hypotheses. Participants in Study 1 read a scenario describing a target individual that was accused of committing a transgression. Again, we focused on situations in which multiple intentionality attributions for the target’s wrongdoings were plausible. Thus, the scenario we used in this study served to make multiple attributions for the target’s actions of varying levels of intentionality salient to participants. We were interested in whether, and how, the status level of the target affected which of these explanations observers deemed most likely.

In this study, our manipulation of target status involved two ascribed status characteristics: the target’s presumed ethnicity as White or Hispanic and the target’s family ties. These manipulations were selected based on prior research demonstrating that, in comparison to Whites, Hispanics are perceived to have lower status in American society (Fiske et al., 2002). In both the high and low status conditions the target was female.\(^1\)
**Method**

**Participants**

Two-hundred-forty-five undergraduate students from an east-coast university participated in this study in exchange for partial course credit as part of an introductory organizational behavior course.²

**Materials**

We gave participants a scenario describing a situation in which an individual was involved in an alleged wrongdoing concerning the underpayment of personal income taxes to the Internal Revenue Service. In the low status condition, participants read the following passage (modifications for the high status condition appear in brackets):

Yolanda Ramirez [Elizabeth McAllister Wallace], who was born and raised in New York, is the daughter of Mexican immigrants [comes from a family with prominent social and political connections in the community]. Recently, the Internal Revenue Service accused Yolanda [Ms. Wallace] of underpaying the federal government on her 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. However, it’s not clear how many of these incorrect tax returns are simple mistakes due to a lack of understanding of the new tax codes and how many are deliberate attempts to pay fewer taxes by “faking ignorance” about the new laws. Although official charges have not been filed against Yolanda [Ms. Wallace], the IRS alleges that Yolanda’s [Ms. Wallace’s] tax return understated the amount of money that she owed the federal government.
In this scenario, we manipulated status through the target’s presumed ethnicity (as indicated by the target’s name and the reference to the target’s family) and the target’s family connections (whether the target’s family was socially and politically prominent, or had emigrated from Mexico). Consistent with past research, we reinforced these status differences throughout the passage by also altering the formality of the names and titles referring to the target (i.e., referring to the target as Ms. Wallace, rather than Yolanda; Tiedens et al., 2000).

Pretest

We first conducted a pretest on the above status manipulations to ensure that these manipulations did not confound status with other related constructs, particularly general intelligence and competence, and specific expertise and experience in the domain in question, personal income taxes. In everyday life, intelligence, competence, expertise, and experience are likely to be positively correlated with status. High status individuals in society are often assumed to have experience and expertise in a wide variety of domains, even when there is no specific evidence suggesting that they possess skills in a particular area (see Webster & Driskell, 1978). High status individuals may also be stereotyped as more intelligent and competent than low status individuals (Fiske et al., 2002). However, to demonstrate that any effects obtained in Study 1 were driven by status differences between the two targets, and not differences in one of these related constructs, we sought to disentangle status from these other factors.

To assess whether our scenarios met these objectives, we gave the first sentence of one of the above scenarios (i.e., the status manipulations) to a separate set of participants and asked them to rate the target on five self-concern characteristics (ambitious, independent, dominant, confident, and submissive [reversed]) and five other-concern characteristics (good-natured, warm, sincere, agreeable, and cold [reversed]). These traits were selected from Wiggins (1979)
interpersonal taxonomy and Fiske et al.’s (2002) research on stereotype content. In addition, participants also rated the target’s perceived competence and intelligence. Participants then rated the target’s experience in four domains (including paying personal income taxes) and her expertise in four domains (including personal income tax regulations). Finally, participants indicated how much status the target had in society. Each of these questions was assessed separately on 7-point scales (with high numbers always indicating more of the attribute in question). Half of the participants ($N = 15$) received the high status manipulation, and half ($N = 15$) received the low status manipulation.

After reverse coding the appropriate items, we formed composite measures of the target’s self- ($\alpha = .68$) and other-concern ($\alpha = .87$). The means and significance levels for the pretest items are presented in Table 1. Consistent with our intentions, participants perceived differences in target status across the two conditions: Elizabeth McAllister Wallace was perceived to have higher status than Yolanda Ramirez. Also, as predicted by prior research on status and social motive stereotypes (Conway et al., 1996; Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske et al., 1999), the status manipulations affected perceptions of the target’s self- and other-concern. The high status target was perceived as significantly more self-concerned and less other-concerned than the low status target. Importantly, however, differences in status between the two conditions did not lead to perceived differences in the targets’ general competence or intelligence.

Status differences also led to differences in perceived experience and expertise in certain domains. The high status target was viewed as having greater expertise in ballroom dancing, whereas the low status target was seen as having greater experience in salsa dancing. However, there were no differences in perceived experience in paying income taxes or expertise in income tax rules and regulations between the two conditions. Thus, as intended, the status manipulations
used in Study 1 created differences in perceived status between the two targets, but not differences in the targets’ overall levels of competence or intelligence, or their experience or expertise with personal income taxes.

Procedure

We assigned Study 1 participants to one of the two target status conditions (high versus low). After reading the scenario, participants answered two free-response questions. First, we asked participants to write a short paragraph stating their opinion about why the target may have underpaid her taxes. Second, we asked participants to elaborate on the punishment, if any, they would recommend for the target’s actions. Following these questions, participants indicated how much status they thought the target had in society. This question was assessed on a 7-point scale (1 = very low status; 7 = very high status), and served as a manipulation check.

After completing the questionnaire, we fully debriefed the participants and credited them for their participation.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations for the dependent measures are reported in Table 2.

Manipulation Check

Elizabeth Wallace was judged to have higher status ($M = 5.66$) than Yolanda Ramirez ($M = 3.30$), $b = 1.18$, $t(242) = 19.75$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.52$, indicating that the manipulation of status worked as intended.

Punishment severity

Participants’ written responses to the question of what punishment, if any, the target should receive were content-analyzed by the fourth author and another coder, both of whom were blind to both hypotheses and experimental conditions at the time the coding was completed.
The two coders rated the severity of the punishment suggested by the participant on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all severe; 5 = very severe). The two coders’ ratings were reliable ($r_{wg} = .99$, $ICC(2) = .65, p < .001$), and were averaged to create a rating of punishment severity for each participant.

Target status affected the severity of the punishments that participants recommended for the target’s actions. In support of Hypothesis 1, participants recommended more severe punishments ($M = 2.66$) when the target was described as a high status individual than when the target was described as a low status individual ($M = 2.47$), $b = 0.09$, $t(240) = 2.23$, $p = .027$, $d = 0.29$.

**Attributions of Intentionality for Target’s Actions**

For the free-response question concerning participants’ attributions for the target’s actions, the coders used separate 5-point scales (1 = not at all; 5 = very much) to assess 1) the extent to which participants believed the target accidentally filed the incorrect tax return due to ignorance of tax codes (a low intentionality attribution) and 2) the extent to which participants thought the target deliberately filed the incorrect tax return in an effort to profit (a high intentionality attribution). The coders’ ratings on these two items were reliable (Item 1: $r_{wg} = .99$, $ICC(2) = .82, p < .001$; Item 2: $r_{wg} = .99, ICC(2) = .92, p < .001$). Thus, we averaged the two coders’ ratings for each item, and then, after reverse coding Item 1, averaged the two items ($a = .95$) to form a composite measure of perceived intentionality of the target’s actions (with higher numbers indicating greater perceived intentionality). In support of Hypothesis 2, participants thought that the target was much more likely to have intentionally filed the incorrect tax return when she was described as a high ($M = 2.27$), as opposed to low ($M = 1.72$), status individual, $b = .27$, $t(243) = 3.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.48$. 
Role of Intentionality Attributions in Punishment Recommendations

To assess whether attributions of intentionality mediated the relationship between target status and punishment recommendations, we first followed the multiple regression procedure prescribed by Baron & Kenny (1986). In addition to the regressions reported above, we also regressed punishment severity on target status (the independent variable) and participants’ intentionality attributions for the target’s actions (the proposed mediator; see Figure 2). In support of Hypothesis 3, the extent to which participants attributed intentionality to the target’s actions significantly predicted punishment severity ($b = .17$, $t(239) = 4.73$, $p < .001$): The more participants thought the target acted out of a deliberate intent to profit (i.e., the more they attributed intentionality to her actions), the more severe the punishment they recommended for her. Additionally, the direct effect of target status on punishment severity was no longer statistically significant when intentionality attribution measure was added to the model.

Mediation is indicated when the size of an indirect effect differs significantly from zero (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). In this case, the indirect effect is the effect of target status on punishment severity through the mediator, intentionality (path a * path b in Figure 2). To test for mediation, we used a bootstrap procedure to test the magnitude of the indirect effect. We implemented the bootstrap by drawing 1000 random samples with replacement from the full sample (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993; Stine, 1989). The indirect effect was computed using this bootstrap sample, and based on these results, we constructed a bias-corrected confidence interval to ascertain whether the indirect effect differed significantly from zero (see MacKinnon et al., 2004). The indirect effect from the original data set was $0.27 * 0.17 = 0.05$ (path a * path b in Figure 2), and the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect from the bootstrap procedure excluded zero (0.02, 0.08), indicating that this indirect effect differed significantly from zero.
This non-zero indirect effect is taken as evidence that intentionality attributions mediated the relationship between the target’s status and participants’ punishment recommendations: The more participants believed that the target intentionally transgressed, the more severe her recommended punishment. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

The presence of a significant indirect effect in combination with a nonsignificant direct effect after controlling for the mediator has traditionally been taken as evidence of full mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Given this standard, the above results provide support for full mediation of the direct effect between target status and punishment severity. More recently, however, researchers have cautioned against using the significance of the direct effect as the only standard to assess the strength of mediation because null-hypothesis statistical tests are sensitive to sample size; hence, a trivial direct effect could be statistically significant in a large sample, or a large effect nonsignificant in a small one (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Shrout & Bolger (2002) suggest that the strength of mediation should be represented as a continuum, not a dichotomy. They advocate for reporting the confidence interval for the proportion of the effect size mediated, $P_M$ (defined as the indirect effect divided by the total effect) to assess mediation strength, with the caveat that confidence intervals of the effect ratio are often quite wide for samples of fewer than 500 observations. In our original data set, $P_M = 0.49$, suggesting that approximately half of the total effect was mediated. The 95% CI for $P_M$ from the bootstrap procedure was (0.18, 1.00), indicating that between 20-100% of the direct effect is explained by the mediating process. Thus, rather than categorizing our findings as full mediation based on the nonsignificant direct effect after controlling for the mediator, we adopt Shrout & Bolger’s (2002) more conservative approach and conclude that our findings are consistent with, although not necessarily conclusive of, full mediation based on the upper bound of $P_M$. 
Discussion

In support of our predictions, participants recommended more stringent punishments for the identical transgression and attributed greater intentionality to the target’s actions when the target was described as a high status, rather than low status, individual. Furthermore, greater attributions of intentionality were associated with more stringent punishments and effects of target status on participants’ punishment recommendations were mediated by the participants’ intentionality attributions for the target’s actions.

Importantly, pretesting of the status manipulations used in Study 1 revealed no differences in overall competence or intelligence between the high and low status targets, nor any differences in perceived experience or expertise in the domain in question, personal income taxes. Although status may often be positively correlated with these attributes in everyday life, the results of Study 1 demonstrate that the effects of status on attributions and punishment are not solely attributable to these factors.

Study 2

The objective of Study 2 was twofold. First, we wanted to replicate the results of Study 1 using achieved, rather than ascribed, target status characteristics. In this study, we manipulated target status through the targets’ education and organizational positions. Second, having found evidence in Study 1 for the causal model illustrated in Figure 1a, we wanted to further specify the model by investigating the “micromediators” (Cook & Campbell, 1979) underlying the first causal link: the relationship between a target’s status and observers’ intentionality attributions. As mentioned previously, status positions are associated with social motive stereotypes: High status individuals are stereotyped as more self-concerned and less other-concerned than low status individuals (Conway et al., 1996; Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske et al., 1999). We proposed that
these social motive stereotypes will mediate the relationship between an individual’s level of status and observers’ attributions of intentionality for the individual’s transgressions. Higher perceived self-concern will lead to greater attributions of intentionality: The more self-concerned an individual is perceived to be, the more plausible it is that he or she intentionally transgressed in an effort to maximize his or her own benefit. Conversely, higher perceived other-concern will lead to lesser attributions of intentionality: The more other-concerned an individual is perceived to be, the less plausible it is that the individual would knowingly cheat or harm others, and thus the more likely it is they transgressed unintentionally. This logic suggests six additional hypotheses concerning the relationship between target status and intentionality attributions.

Stated formally:

**Hypothesis 5a:** High status individuals will be perceived as more self-concerned than low status individuals.

**Hypothesis 5b:** The more an observer perceives an individual as self-concerned, the greater the intentionality attributed to the individual’s wrongdoings.

**Hypothesis 6:** The relationship between a wrongdoer’s status and observers’ attributions of the wrongdoer’s intentionality will be mediated by observers’ perceptions of the wrongdoer’s self-concern.

**Hypothesis 7a:** High status individuals will be perceived as less other-concerned than low status individuals.

**Hypothesis 7b:** The more an observer perceives an individual as other-concerned, the lesser the intentionality attributed to the individual’s wrongdoings.
Hypothesis 8: The relationship between a wrongdoer’s status and observers’ attributions of the wrongdoer’s intentionality will be mediated by observers’ perceptions of the wrongdoer’s other-concern.

The objective of Study 2 was to explore the validity of this more specified causal model, illustrated in Figure 1b. To do this we used a paradigm similar to that used in Study 1, but, in addition, asked participants to rate the target on characteristics related to self- and other-concern.

Method

Participants

Two-hundred-seven undergraduate students from an east-coast university participated in this study in exchange for partial course credit as part of an introductory organizational behavior course.

Pretest

For this study, we manipulated target status through differences the target’s education and occupation, two achieved characteristics which have been shown to result in differences in perceived status (e.g., Conway et al., 1996; Ellyson, Dovidio, Corson, & Vinicur, 1980; Tiedens et al., 2000). The high status target description was: “William Wallace, M.D., is the chief of orthopedic surgery at a major metropolitan hospital.” The low status description read: “Will Wallace is a physician's assistant in the orthopedic surgery department at a major metropolitan hospital.”

As in Study 1, we first conducted a pretest on these status manipulations to ensure that these manipulations did not confound status with other related constructs. Unlike our ascribed manipulations in Study 1, we expected that the achieved status manipulations used in this study would be associated with differences in the perceived competence and intelligence of the targets.
Achieved characteristics, by definition, are those that are acquired through one’s efforts, rather than bestowed by birthright, and thus it is reasonable to expect that individuals with more education or higher status occupations earned these distinctions based on their superior competence or intelligence. However, as in Study 1, we did want to ensure that our status manipulations did not lead to differences in the perceived experience or expertise with the domain of interest, personal income taxes.

We gave the status manipulations to a separate set of 40 participants and asked them to rate the target on the same items as those used in the Study 1 pretest. Half of the participants ($N = 20$) received the high status manipulation, and half ($N = 20$) received the low status manipulation. The means and significance levels for the pretest measures are presented in Table 3. Consistent with our intentions, participants perceived differences in the target’s status across the two conditions: William Wallace, M.D., was perceived to have higher status than William Wallace, physician’s assistant. These status manipulations also led to significant differences in the target’s perceived self-concern ($\alpha = .82$), but not other-concern ($\alpha = .70$). Unlike in Study 1, but consistent with our predictions for achieved status characteristics, the status manipulations were associated with significant differences in the target’s perceived competence and intelligence: The high status target was perceived to be generally more competent and intelligent than the low status target. Status differences also led to differences in perceived experience and expertise in certain domains. The high status target was viewed as having greater experience in diagnosing medical problems, marginally more experience in driving a car, and greater expertise in medicine, whereas the low status target was seen as marginally more experienced in salsa dancing. However, as in Study 1, there were no differences in perceived experience in paying income taxes or expertise in income tax rules and regulations between the two conditions.
Materials and Procedure

We presented the materials for this study via a website and participants completed the study on-line. First, we gave participants one of the above descriptions of William Wallace, M.D., or Will Wallace, physician’s assistant.

After participants read either the high or low status description, we asked them to rate the target on the extent to which he possessed five self-concern characteristics (dominant, confident, concerned about himself, timid [reverse scored], and submissive [reverse scored]) and five other-concern characteristics (warm, agreeable, caring, humanitarian, and cold [reverse scored]). Given the pretest differences in the targets’ perceived competence and intelligence, we also had participants rate the target’s competence and intelligence. We measured each of these items on separate 7-point scales (1 = not at all; 7 = very much) and then averaged the relevant items to form composite ratings of self-concern ($\alpha = .74$) and other-concern ($\alpha = .72$). Participants also indicated the extent to which the target had a high status occupation and how much status they thought the target had in society. We measured these questions on separate 7-point scales (1 = very low status; 7 = very high status), and averaged them ($\alpha = .87$) for use as a manipulation check.

After completing these questions, we gave participants a description of a recent incident in which the target had been accused of underpayment of personal income taxes, similar to the scenario used in Study 1. As in Study 1, we reinforced the status differences between the targets throughout the passage by referring to the high status target as Dr. Wallace and the low status target as Will. After reading the passage, participants answered three questions to assess their attributions of intentionality for the target’s actions. Participants indicated how likely it was that (1) the target decided to understate his taxes with full awareness of the tax laws, (2) the target
inadvertently understated his taxes due to ignorance of the tax laws, and (3) the target’s actions were due to a lack of awareness (as awareness is a fundamental component of the intentionality construct; Malle & Knobe, 1997; Malle & Nelson, 2003). We measured participants’ responses to each of these questions separately on 7-point scales (1 = very unlikely; 7 = very likely). After reverse coding the last two items, we averaged the three items to form a composite measure of intentionality attributions for the target’s actions (again, with higher numbers indicating greater perceived intentionality; α = .81). Participants also answered four questions to assess their recommended punishment for the target. Participants indicated (1) the extent to which they target should be punished by the IRS (1 = definitely not; 7 = definitely), (2) how severe the punishment should be if he was punished (1 = not at all severe; 7 = very severe), (3) the extent to which paying back the money he owed the IRS would be a sufficient punishment (1 = not at all sufficient; 7 = completely sufficient), and (4) the extent to which the IRS should impose an additional penalty above and beyond the repayment of the owed taxes (1 = definitely not; 7 = definitely). After reverse coding the third item, we averaged these four questions to form a composite measure of punishment severity (α = .82).

**Results**

Descriptive statistics and correlations for the dependent measures are reported in Table 2.

**Manipulation Check**

Dr. Wallace was judged to have higher status (M = 6.26) than Will (M = 4.74), b = 0.76, t(205) = 13.08, p < .001, d = 1.82, indicating that the manipulation of status worked as intended.

**Punishment Severity**

As in Study 1, the target’s status affected the severity of the punishments that participants recommended for their actions. In support of Hypothesis 1, participants recommended more
severe punishments ($M = 3.55$) when the target was described as a high status individual when the target was described as a low status individual ($M = 2.89$), $b = 0.33, t(205) = 4.21, p < .001, d = 0.60$.

**Attributions of Intentionality for Target’s Actions**

Participants thought that the target was much more likely to have intentionally filed the incorrect tax return when he was described as a high ($M = 3.63$), as opposed to low ($M = 3.13$), status individual, $b = .25, t(205) = 2.91, p = .004, d = 0.41$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was again supported.

**Perceptions of the Target’s Social Motives**

In support of Hypotheses 5a and 7a, and consistent with past research on status stereotypes (Conway et al., 1996; Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske et al., 1999), target status affected participants’ perceptions of the target’s self- and other-concern. The high status target was perceived as significantly more self-concerned ($Ms = 5.48$ vs. $4.35$, $b = 0.56, t(205) = 10.95, p < .001, d = 1.54$) and significantly less other-concerned ($Ms = 4.43$ vs. $4.81$, $b = -0.19, t(205) = -3.46, p = .001, d = 0.49$) than the low status target. Also, consistent with the results of our pretest, the high status target was perceived to be more competent ($Ms = 6.46$ vs. $5.32$, $b = 0.57, t(205) = 7.91, p < .001, d = 1.10$) and intelligent ($Ms = 6.55$ vs. $5.62$, $b = 0.47, t(205) = 6.73, p < .001, d = 0.93$) than the low status target.

**Tests of the Proposed Mediated Relationships**

Following the recommendations of Baron & Kenny (1986) and Edwards & Lambert (2007), we used path analysis to test the mediated relationships in our complete causal model illustrated in Figure 1b. In short, our assertion is that target status affects observers’ perceptions of the target’s self- and other-concern, and that these social motive inferences lead to differences
in intentionality attributions for the target’s actions (i.e., self- and other-concern mediate the relationship between target status and intentionality attributions). Intentionality attributions, in turn, affect the severity of the recommended punishments. To test this model, we followed the procedures recommended by Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein (2008) for assessing mediation in a three-path meditational model (i.e., when two mediators intervene in a series between an independent and dependent variable). As the first step in this path analysis, we tested the first half of the model: the effects of target status and perceived self- and other-concern on intentionality (see Figure 1b). We regressed intentionality attributions on target status (the independent variable) and participants’ perceptions of the target’s self- and other-concern (the proposed mediators between target status and intentionality). As may be seen in Table 4, Regression 1, participants’ perceptions of the target’s self- and other-concern significantly affected their attributions of intentionality for the target’s actions, supporting Hypotheses 5b and 7b: The more participants saw the target as self-concerned, the more likely they were to attribute intentionality to his actions, whereas the more participants saw the target as other-concerned, the less likely they were to believe he transgressed with intention. Additionally, the direct effect of target status on intentionality attributions was no longer statistically significant when measures of perceived self- and other-concern were added to the model.

As in Study 1, and consistent with the procedure recommended by Taylor et al. (2008) for this type of model, we used a bootstrap procedure to test the magnitude of the two indirect effects (one through self-concern and one through other-concern) separately. For each indirect effect, we implemented the bootstrap by drawing 1000 random samples with replacement from the full sample, computed the indirect effect using this bootstrap sample, and constructed a bias-corrected confidence interval based on these results. The indirect effect through self-concern
from the original data set was $0.56 \times 0.23 = 0.13$. The 95% confidence interval excluded zero (0.01, 0.31), indicating a significant indirect effect through self-concern. The indirect effect through other-concern from the original data set was $-0.19 \times -0.24 = 0.05$ and the 95% confidence interval excluded zero (0.01, 0.11), indicating a significant indirect effect through other-concern. Thus, both self-concern and other-concern mediated the relationship between target status and intentionality attributions, supporting Hypotheses 6 and 8.

We also used the bootstrap estimates to test whether one of these indirect effects was larger than the other, thereby suggesting that one mediator was carrying more of the mediated effect than the other. This was accomplished by taking the difference of the two indirect effects, which was $0.13 - 0.05 = 0.08$ in the original data set. Using the bootstrap sample, the 95% confidence interval for the difference between these two indirect effects did not exclude zero (-0.05, 0.26). The upper bound of this confidence interval suggests that self-concern may mediate more of the relationship between target status and intentionality attributions than other-concern, but the negative lower bound prevents us from concluding that there is a significant difference in the magnitude of these two mediators. Thus, these results are consistent with the conclusion that self-concern and other-concern “pulled equal weight” in mediating the relationship between target status and intentionality attributions.

To assess the strength of mediation, we again computed $P_M$. In this case, we computed the effect proportion mediated using the total mediated effect (the sum of the effect through self-concern and the effect through other-concern). This proportion indicates the percentage of the total effect that is carried through both mediators collectively. In our original data set, $P_M = 0.71$, suggesting that approximately 70% of the total effect was mediated. The 95% confidence interval for $P_M$ from the bootstrap procedure was (0.14, 1.00). Again, the upper bound of this
range is consistent with, although not necessarily conclusive of, full mediation of the relationship between target status and intentionality attributions through self- and other-concern.

As the second step in our path analysis, we then tested the full model illustrated in Figure 1b. We regressed punishment severity on target status (the independent variable), participants’ perceptions of the target’s self- and other-concern (the “stage 1” mediators), and participants’ intentionality attributions for the target’s actions (the “stage 2” mediator). As may be seen in Table 4, Regression 4, participants’ intentionality attributions significantly predicted punishment severity, supporting Hypothesis 3: The more participants believed the target transgressed intentionally, the more severe the punishment they recommended for him. Furthermore, the direct effect of target status on punishment severity was no longer statistically significant when the mediators were added to the model.

To assess the validity of our complete causal model, we again used the bootstrap procedure to test the magnitude of the indirect effects. In this case, there were five indirect effects from target status to punishment severity, two of which were of particular relevance given our predictions: one from status to punishment severity through self-concern and intentionality and another from status to punishment severity through other-concern and intentionality. These two indirect effects are the ones illustrated in Figure 1b. Drawing from the regression coefficients presented above in the text and in Table 4, the magnitude of the indirect effect through self-concern from the original data set was $0.56 \times 0.23 \times 0.39 = 0.05$. The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval from the bootstrap sample excluded zero ($0.002$, $0.121$), indicating that the indirect effect through self-concern and intentionality mediated the relationship between target status and punishment severity. For other-concern, the indirect effect from the original data set was $-0.19 \times -0.24 \times 0.39 = 0.02$, and the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval from the
bootstrap sample excluded zero (0.003, 0.041), indicating that the indirect effect through other-concern and intentionality also mediated the relationship between target status and punishment severity. These results support the path model illustrated in Figure 1b.

To assess the strength these two mediating paths, we again computed $P_M$ for the sum the two indirect effects of interest. This proportion indicates the percentage of the total effect of target status on punishment severity that is carried first through either self-concern or other-concern, and then through intentionality. In our original data set, $P_M = 0.21$, suggesting that approximately 20% of the total effect was mediated. The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for $P_M$ from the bootstrap procedure was (0.04, 0.51), suggesting that at most 50% of the effect is carried through these two mediating paths. This is evidence of partial mediation.

The fact that the two indirect effects of interest do not fully account for the variance in punishment severity is not particularly surprising given that our two-stage mediated model illustrated in Figure 1b results in three additional indirect paths through which target status could affect punishment severity. In particular, the results of Regression 4 in Table 4 indicate that the target’s self-concern has a significant effect on punishment severity even after controlling for the target’s perceived intentionality. This suggests that one of the three unmeasured indirect effects may be carrying a significant part of the total mediated effect: the path from status to self-concern to punishment severity (bypassing intentionality). In the original data set, this indirect effect was $0.56 \times 0.25 = 0.14$, and the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval from the bootstrap sample excluded zero (0.02, 0.26), indicating that this indirect effect also mediated the relationship between target status and punishment severity. For this indirect effect, $P_M$ from the original data set was 0.42 and 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for $P_M$ from the bootstrap procedure was (0.06, 0.95), suggesting that anywhere from 6 to 95% of the effect of target status...
on punishment severity is explained by this mediating path. The high upper bound of this confidence interval raises the question of whether this indirect effect carries more of the mediated effect than our two hypothesized paths illustrated in Figure 1b. To assess this, we took the difference between the sum of our two proposed indirect effects and the indirect effect from status to punishment severity through self-concern (excluding intentionality). This difference was 0.14 - 0.07 = 0.07 in the original data set. Using the bootstrap sample, the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the difference between these two indirect effects did not exclude zero (-0.09, 0.21) and thus we cannot conclude that there is a significant difference in the magnitude of these mediating paths.

The net effect of these analyses is that we find support for the model proposed in Figure 1b, as both indirect effects illustrated in this model are statistically significant. However, these results suggest that there is also an effect of perceptions of a target’s self-concern on the severity of observers’ punishment recommendations for the target that is not mediated by observers’ assessments of the target’s intentionality. Although we did not specifically predict this effect, it is consistent with existing theories of retributive justice. We return to this issue in the Discussion section for this study, after first turning our attention to an alternative explanation for our findings.

*Ruling Out an Alternative Explanation*

An alternative explanation for our proposed model is that our observed effects were driven by differences in the perceived competence and intelligence of the targets. To assess the validity of this alternative explanation, we first regressed intentionality attributions on target status, competence, and intelligence. As may be seen in Table 4, Regression 2, neither perceived target competence nor intelligence predicted intentionality attributions, and the effect of target
status on attributions was still significant when competence and intelligence were added to the model. We also regressed intentionality attributions on target status, competence, intelligence, and self- and other-concern (Table 4, Regression 3). Even controlling for competence and intelligence, which again did not predict intentionality attributions, our results were unchanged: The effects of self- and other-concern were still significant, and the effect of target status on attributions was no longer significant. Finally, we regressed punishment severity on target status, competence, intelligence, self- and other-concern, and intentionality attributions (Table 4, Regression 5). Again, even controlling for the perceived competence and intelligence of the target, attributions of intentionality significantly predicted the severity of the recommended punishment, whereas target status did not.

Discussion

The results of this study replicate and extend the findings of Study 1. Manipulating status through achieved, rather than ascribed, characteristics, the same pattern of results was obtained: Participants were more likely to attribute greater intentionality to their wrongdoings and recommend more severe punishments for high status targets than for low status targets.

In addition, Study 2 provided greater insight into the psychological process underlying the differences in intentionality attributions for high and low status targets. Consistent with prior research on status stereotypes, high status targets were perceived as more self-concerned, and less other-concerned, than low status individuals, and these social motive stereotypes led to differences in participants’ attributions for the high and low status targets’ behavior. In line with our predictions, perceptions of higher self-concern were associated with greater attributions of intentionality, whereas perceptions of higher other-concern were associated with lesser
attributions of intentionality, and both self- and other-concern mediated the relationship between target status and attributions of intentionality.

Study 2 also enabled us to test the full causal model illustrated in Figure 1b. Our results indicated that both hypothesized mediating paths were significant, supporting our general argument that target status affects perceptions of the target’s social motives (self- and other-concern) which in turn affects intentionality attributions for the target’s actions and then punishment recommendations. Interestingly, however, this analysis revealed another path between target status and punishment severity that we had not specifically predicted: the effect of target status on punishment severity through self-concern (but not intentionality). A potential explanation for this effect comes from the literature on retributive justice. Carlsmith et al. (2002) suggest that punishment recommendations are driven by punishers’ “moral outrage” toward the offense and the offender. Moral outrage is affected by perceptions of the wrongdoer’s intentionality, but also by a host of other factors outside the focus of the present investigation, such as the magnitude of the harm inflicted on the victim. In line with this reasoning, one possibility is that a target’s self-concern affects attributions of intentionality, as demonstrated in the present study, but also directly affects observers’ moral outrage. In other words, all other factors being equal, observers may experience greater moral outrage for transgressions committed by individuals who are presumed to be highly self-interested, and consequently recommend more severe punishments. It may be worthwhile for future research to explore the relationship between a target’s perceived self-concern and the amount of moral outrage that observers experience as a result of the target’s transgressions.

As a final note, the results of Study 2 also helped to rule out a plausible alternative explanation. Although the achieved characteristics used for our status manipulations affected
participants’ perceptions of the targets’ competence and intelligence, these two variables did not account for the relationship between target status, intentionality attributions, and punishment severity, and our proposed model held even after controlling for the targets’ competence and intelligence.

**General Discussion**

The quest for status, respect, and influence is a fundamental drive for many individuals (Frank, 1985; Winter, 1973), in part because high status is associated with a host of positive life outcomes. As noted previously, high status individuals, by definition, are more valued and respected by others than low status individuals (Berger et al., 1977; Webster & Foschi, 1988), but, in addition, often have better physical and mental health (Adler et al., 2000; Gilbert, 1992; Stansfield & Marmot, 1992), receive greater financial compensation for their work (e.g., Judge & Cable, 2004), and are given greater decision authority, control over group processes, and air time to voice their opinions in group contexts (Bales, 1950; Berger et al., 1980). The studies presented in this paper, however, suggest that high status is not without its pitfalls. In particular, in two studies, observers were more likely to attribute greater intentionality to the alleged wrongdoings of high status individuals than to the identical actions of low status individuals, and consequently punish the former more severely than the latter. Taken together, the results of prior studies investigating the beneficial consequences of high status, combined with the current research demonstrating a negative consequence, suggests that status may serve as an “outcome amplifier”: High status individuals may reap greater rewards from their successes than low status individuals, but we find that they will also bear greater punishments for their failures. Thus, it appears that the higher one’s status, the greater the variance in one’s experienced life outcomes.
In addition to illuminating a negative consequence associated with a frequently-assumed beneficial attribute, high status, this research has other theoretical implications for the study of human behavior in organizational contexts. Although much of the organizational work on justice has focused on the distribution of positive outcomes (e.g., pay, promotions, and praise) among individuals, a growing literature has focused on the darker side of organizational justice: how individuals assign blame and punishment for the transgressions committed by others (e.g., Carlsmith et al., 2002; Darley & Pittman, 2003; Feather, 1999; Miller & Vidmar, 1981). The litany of corporate scandals reported in the media is an ever-present reminder that transgressions of all shapes and sizes are a reality of organizational life. Thus, the psychology of retributive justice is a topic of fundamental importance for organizational scholars. Like our studies, other research in this domain has investigated whether characteristics of the criminal affect observers’ reactions to the perpetrator. However, to our knowledge, all of these studies have associated negative characteristics of the wrongdoer, such as the wrongdoer’s prior history of misbehavior (Ebbessen & Konecni, 1975; Carroll & Payne, 1977), with increased punishment. In contrast, our research is unique in that it demonstrates that a positive, and generally coveted, attribute, status, can actually result in more severe sanctions for a wrongdoer.

The current studies are also of practical significance, as individuals often face decisions about whether, and how severely, to punish others throughout their personal and professional lives. Managers are charged with reprimanding, demoting, and even firing their transgressing subordinates, and jury members deliberate over verdicts that decide the fate of wrongdoers. Even if wrongdoers do not face courts of law, they are likely to face equally punitive courts of public opinion that have the power to administer social sanctions, such as public defamation and ostracism, and financial sanctions, such as boycotts of wrongdoers’ organizations. Thus, lay
individuals have the ability to punish transgressors, not only as jurors, but also as superiors, subordinates, customers, clients, peers, and neighbors. As a result, the opinions of lay individuals are particularly important for understanding punitive justice in everyday life.

Beyond punishment recommendations, our findings also have potential practical and theoretical implications for the study of whistle-blowing decisions: decisions by organizational members about whether to disclose illegal or inappropriate wrongdoer behavior to persons or organizations who may be able to enact change (Miceli & Near, 1985). As whistle-blowing is presumed to be beneficial for society at large (Near & Miceli, 1995), researchers have hypothesized about, and investigated, the factors that influence whether or not an individual with knowledge of another’s transgression chooses to go public (e.g., Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2003; Miceli & Near, 1985, 1988). Gundlach et al. (2003) proposed that a whistle-blower’s decision about whether to come forward is affected by the whistle-blower’s attributions for the wrongdoer’s actions, such that individuals are more likely to blow the whistle when they believe the wrongdoer’s behavior to be intentional. This prediction, taken together with our finding that the wrongdoings of high status individuals are perceived as more intentional than the wrongdoings of low status individuals, suggests that, for the identical action, whistle-blowers may be more likely to come forward when the perpetrator is a high, as opposed to low, status organizational member. Interestingly, however, other researchers have predicted the exact opposite: Whistle-blowers should be less likely to blow the whistle as the wrongdoer’s organizational status increases, due to the perceived costs of challenging the wrongdoer, such as the fear of retaliation (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Gundlach et al., 2003). It is possible that future empirical research will reveal that only one of these two predictions is empirically supported, but it may also be the case that these two, seemingly contradictory,
predictions may be reconciled by considering a potential moderator of the relationship between wrongdoer status and whistle-blowing: the power of the wrongdoer over the whistle-blower. In organizational contexts, status and power are often confounded, as the high status organizational members often have reward and coercive power (French & Raven, 1959), over lower status organizational members. In contrast, our studies investigated situations in which the wrongdoers, regardless of their status, had no power over their punishers. Thus, it may be the case that status and power exert opposite effects on a whistle-blower’s likelihood of coming forward. Whistle-blowers may be more likely to come forward about the transgressions of high status wrongdoers than low status wrongdoers, as a result of attributing greater intentionality to the actions of the former than the latter. However, whistle-blowers may be less likely to come forward about the actions of high power wrongdoers than low power wrongdoers, due to their fear that the wrongdoer will retaliate and punish them in some way. Obviously, our studies were not designed to test the moderating role of power in the relationship between wrongdoer status and whistle-blowing, but, given the longstanding practical and theoretical relevance of whistle-blowing decisions, we mention this as a potential implication of our findings that is worthy of future study.

Limitations, Boundary Conditions, and Future Directions

Importantly, the main findings in the current research were replicated using multiple status manipulations, both ascribed (Study 1) and achieved (Study 2), providing evidence for the robustness of the results. However, it is also worth mentioning a few significant limitations and boundary conditions of our research, which could be addressed in future work. For one, our studies relied on a scenario methodology, and our participants were undergraduate students. The experimental paradigms used in this paper were beneficial, as they enabled us to investigate
precise causal relationships, but now, having done so, it would be worthwhile to demonstrate that our findings generalize to other contexts and populations.

Additionally, our research was designed to explore reactions to a specific type of transgression; namely, transgressions in which multiple explanations of varying levels of intentionality are plausible. In these situations, we found that the wrongdoer’s status affected the explanations that observers deemed most likely, and their subsequent punishment recommendations. Of course, not all transgressions will necessarily generate multiple plausible attributions of varying intentionality. In some situations (e.g., violent crimes), the notion that a perpetrator unintentionally transgressed may be less believable, and consequently the effects of status positions on attributions and punishment recommendations may diminish. Thus, the demonstrated link between status positions and attributions may only hold for “white-collar” or “intellectual” crimes in which low intentionality attributions for an individual’s actions seem possible.

On a related note, this link between a target’s status and observers’ attributions may only generalize to situations in which the wrongdoer is assumed to personally benefit in some way from his or her transgression. In both of our studies, the wrongdoer was presumed to have benefitted through his or her actions. The notion that high status targets are more likely to be seen as deliberately transgressing due to their high self-concern and low other-concern assumes that the transgression in question provides the wrongdoer with some personal benefit. Although many transgressions fit this criterion, there are also instances in which a transgression is a “necessary evil” committed to benefit a greater good (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). In such cases, where there is little personal benefit to the wrongdoer, the demonstrated relationship between status and attributions may not hold.
Comparing the results of the two studies presented in this paper, one interesting finding to note is the difference in effect size for the relationship between target status and punishment severity, which was larger in Study 2 than in Study 1. There were multiple differences between the two studies, making it difficult to determine what might account for this difference. One possibility is that this observed difference in the magnitude of the effect was an artifact of the methodological differences between the two studies, as Study 1 used coders’ ratings to assess punishment severity, whereas Study 2 used participants’ responses to scale items. However, another, more interesting, possibility is that this difference was a result of the different sources of target status examined in the two studies: ascribed status in Study 1 versus achieved status in Study 2. Our primary interest in this paper was to explore the effects of status level on intentionality attributions and punishment recommendations, but, as discussed previously, one’s level of status may be determined from an almost infinite permutation of sources. This complexity of the status construct creates a challenge for researchers investigating the consequences of individuals’ status positions, as the effect of any given status level may be moderated by the specific sources of that status (e.g., the strength of our observed relationship between status and punishment severity across studies). It is worthy of future research to explore whether, and how, status consequences, both those discussed in this paper and those examined in other research, may be affected not just by the level of one’s status, but by the specific source of one’s status.

It is also worth noting that our studies were designed to assess the reactions of lay observers – individuals who had no prior relationship with the wrongdoer, and were not in any way harmed by the wrongdoer’s behavior. As we discussed, these observer reactions are of theoretical and practical significance, but our findings may or may not generalize to situations in
which the observer knows the wrongdoer or is actually the victim of the wrongdoer’s actions. Other related research has focused on victims’ reactions to perpetrators (e.g., Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001, 2006) and, in this vein, it would be interesting to explore how our findings may be affected by the relationship between observer and wrongdoer.

Finally, although beyond the scope of this paper, it may also be interesting to explore proactive measures that high status individuals might take when accused of a transgression to alter the attributions made by observers and mitigate the punishments they receive. For example, one possibility is that high status individuals may be able to alter public opinion by reducing their perceived status in the eyes of observers. This could potentially be accomplished by making comparisons to even higher status individuals (thereby generating a contrast effect; e.g., Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995), or by displaying a host of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, or personality attributes, associated with lower status individuals (e.g., Brown, Strong, & Rencher, 1973; Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O’Barr, 1978; Ridgeway, 1987; Washburn & Hakel, 1973). By reframing one’s status, a wrongdoer may be able to change observers’ attributions about the causes of the wrongdoer’s actions (i.e., from a high intentionality to a low intentionally attribution), and consequently reduce the amount of punishment received. In a similar vein, a high status wrongdoer could also attempt to directly influence observers’ attributions by explicitly and repeatedly pleading ignorance (e.g., “I didn’t understand the rules and regulations.”) in an attempt to convince observers that a low intentionality attribution is plausible.

Of course, these types of responses may be effective for reducing the punishment that a high status wrongdoer receives, but they also have the potentially undesirable effect of reducing the wrongdoer’s perceived status. An alternative response would be to take some action to alter
the link between high status and perceptions of self- and other-concern. For example, a high status wrongdoer could highlight charitable work or contributions to charitable organizations in an attempt to affect observers’ assessments of his or her self- and other-concern. Our findings suggest that altering perceptions of the wrongdoer’s self- and other-concern will affect observers’ intentionality attributions, and, in turn, punishment recommendations. Of course, it is likely that for any of these strategies to work, they cannot be perceived as “strategic.” However, these types of post-transgression responses may be worthy of examination in future research.

Conclusion

Perhaps more than ever before, high status individuals and the organizations they represent are subject to intense media scrutiny, and even a minor mistake or transgression by a high status corporate official is likely to be magnified and internationally publicized. This current climate of corporate hyper-vigilance raises several questions about how the reputations of alleged wrongdoers are affected by these types of allegations. For example, are high status individuals held to different standards than their low status counterparts? Do we too quickly assume that high status wrongdoers have intentionally transgressed? The current research was designed to take a first step toward answering these questions. The desire to climb the proverbial corporate ladder may be nearly ubiquitous in today’s society, as the highest ranking individuals capture a disproportionate share of the available pay, perks, and prestige. However, these privileges are not without cost, as our research suggests. Thus, our studies contribute to a broader program of research on retributive justice, and in doing so, provide greater insight into how perceptions of justice are affected not just by the crime, but also by the criminal.
References


Authors’ Note

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Footnotes

1In Study 1 the target was female, in Study 2 the target was male. An earlier pilot study, similar to Study 1, manipulated target gender and found no gender effects. Thus, gender was not manipulated in any of the reported studies. Additionally, another pilot study used the same status manipulations as those used in Study 1, but examined a different transgression, insider trading. The results of this pilot were substantively similar to the results of Study 1.

2At the point which this study was conducted, participants in the study had not discussed any topics relevant to this study, such as status, attributions, or punishment, in their organizational behavior course. Thus, participants’ responses in this study were unlikely to be systematically influenced by any of the material they had learned as part of this course. The same was true for the participants in Study 2.

3In Fiske et al.’s (2002) research, competence and intelligence are included in the vertical dimension of person perception (i.e., self-concern), whereas in Wiggins’ (1979) research they are not.

4The bootstrapping procedure is an alternative to using a Sobel test, in which the indirect effect is divided by its standard error [using a calculation for the standard error of the indirect effect provided by Sobel (1982; 1986)] and then compared to the standard normal distribution to test its significance. However, recent research has indicated that the Sobel test may not be the most appropriate method for testing the significance of the indirect effect (Bollen & Stine, 1990; MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004; Shrout & Bolger, 2002) because the indirect effect is a product of two variables, and the product of two normally distributed random variables will not necessarily be normally distributed. Ignoring this skew in the distribution of the product can reduce the power to detect significant indirect effects (i.e., mediation), particularly when the
sample size is small (<400; Stone & Sobel, 1990). For this reason, an alternative procedure has been recommended, in which confidence intervals for the indirect effect are constructed empirically by creating multiple (e.g., 1000) bootstrap samples from the original data set (see Shrout & Bolger, 2002 for a complete description of the procedure). This allows for the possibility that confidence intervals could be non-symmetric due to non-normal distributions of the indirect effect.

Because the Sobel test relies on an assumption of normality that is likely to be violated, we utilized the bootstrap procedure to test for mediation in both studies and report only these results in the paper. However, given the long tradition of using the Sobel test to demonstrate mediation, we did conduct a Sobel test for each indirect effect we report in the paper and found no substantive differences in results as a function of the procedure we used. Thus, our arguments for mediation are supported by both approaches.
Table 1

*Study 1: Status Manipulation Pretest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Status Target</th>
<th>High Status Target</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status</strong></td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>10.72***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Concern</strong></td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>2.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other-Concern</strong></td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>-2.63*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competence</strong></td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intelligence</strong></td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Status Target</th>
<th>High Status Target</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driving</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salsa Dancing</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>-6.88***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying Taxes</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>-0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosing Medical Problems</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>-1.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Expertise**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Status Target</th>
<th>High Status Target</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driving Regulations</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>-1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballroom Dancing</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>3.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Tax Regulations</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>-0.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *N* = 30.

* *p < .05. ** *p < .01. *** *p < .001.
Table 2

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of dependent measures in Studies 1 and 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 1</th>
<th>Study 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Intentionality attributions</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Punishment severity</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-concern</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Other-concern</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Competence</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Intelligence</td>
<td>5.99</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Intentionality attributions</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Punishment severity</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Study 1 N = 245, Study 2 N = 207.

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.
Table 3

*Study 2: Status Manipulation Pretest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Status Target</th>
<th>High Status Target</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status</strong></td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>3.80***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Concern</strong></td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>5.53***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other-Concern</strong></td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competence</strong></td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>3.76***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intelligence</strong></td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>5.32***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>2.01+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salsa Dancing</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>-1.71+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying Taxes</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosing Medical Problems</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>2.90**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expertise</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving Regulations</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballroom Dancing Technique</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>-1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Tax Regulations</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>3.57***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $N = 40$.

+ $p < .10$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 
Table 4

Study 2: OLS Regressions to Predict Intentionality Attributions, and Punishment Severity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Intentionality Attributions</th>
<th>Punishment Severity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target status</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-concern</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-concern</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentionality attributions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² | .09 | .04 | .09 | .29 | .30 |

Note. N = 207. For target status, high status was coded 1 and low status was coded -1. Regression models are presented vertically; numbers across the top of the table in parentheses signify different regression models, and the labels across the top of the table signify the dependent measure for the regressions in the columns below. Entries in the columns are unstandardized regression coefficients. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.
Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Proposed Causal Model for Relationship Between Wrongdoer Status, Social Motive Stereotypes, Intentionality Attributions, and Punishment Recommendations.

*Figure 2.* Study 1: Intentionality Attributions and Punishment Recommendations as a Function of Target Status.
Figure 1a

Note. All variables in the models are conceptualized and measured as observers’ subjective assessments. Pluses and minuses indicate direction of hypothesized relationships.

Figure 1b

Note. All variables in the models are conceptualized and measured as observers’ subjective assessments. Pluses and minuses indicate direction of hypothesized relationships.
Figure 2

Note. $N = 245$. For target status, high status was coded 1 and low status was coded -1. Numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients. Letters denote paths in the model.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$. 

Wrongdoer Status $\rightarrow$ Intentionality Attributions $\rightarrow$ Punishment Severity

$\text{c/c'} = .09^{*}/.05$

$\text{a} = .27^{***}$

$\text{b} = .17^{***}$