



Effects of wrongdoer status on moral licensing[☆]

Evan Polman^{a,*}, Nathan C. Pettit^b, Batia M. Wiesenfeld^b

^a Wisconsin School of Business, University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA

^b Stern School of Business, New York University, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- High and low status wrongdoers receive moral license, but for different reasons.
- High status wrongdoers receive moral credentials.
- Judges reinterpret high status wrongdoers' behavior less negatively.
- Low status wrongdoers receive moral credits.
- Judges show low status wrongdoers greater sympathy.

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ABSTRACT

We examine the effects of wrongdoer status on receiving moral license, a social acceptance of norm-violating behavior. Compared to a control condition, we found that both high and low status wrongdoers receive more license, but for different reasons. Judges gave high status wrongdoers *moral credentials* by reinterpreting their behavior less negatively; whereas judges gave low status wrongdoers *moral credits* by showing them greater sympathy. Of import, our analyses provide insights into the underlying mechanisms explaining the moderating role of wrongdoer status. If transgressions are ambiguous (versus unambiguous), so as to allow for positive reinterpretation, judges were more inclined to evaluate behavior as less wrong and thus credential high status wrongdoers. Likewise, if judges are dispositionally more (versus less) amenable to showing others sympathy, they were more likely to credit low status wrongdoers. Our results shed light on different paths to receiving moral license and suggest that factors other than prior behavior (in our case, actor's status) may influence the severity of punishment.

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Introduction

Social approval and disapproval play a critical regulatory function shaping how people behave in social contexts. In theory, desirable and beneficial behaviors are met with greater approval while those that are undesirable and potentially harmful elicit disapproval from others, providing incentives for norm adherence and insuring better outcomes for all. Yet these social rules do not seem to apply to everyone. It is easy to recall people who engage in unethical and immoral behavior without receiving the social disapproval that we expect to regulate such misdeeds. For example, the public appears to tolerate the misconduct of highly regarded political figures all around the world. Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi evaded charges (and placed second in Italy's recent 2013 election) in spite of his

“bunga bunga” parties that allegedly involved under-age prostitutes. The Kennedy family may be considered American royalty, but Joe Kennedy was elected to Congress after engaging in questionable activity including draft dodging and stock market manipulation; Ted Kennedy had an illustrious career in the Senate despite causing the death of a female companion due to his drunk driving; and President John F. Kennedy is beloved despite extramarital affairs linking him to organized crime and a Soviet spy. Furthermore, well-connected and prominent financier John Meriwether was able to attract many investors to Long Term Capital Management after his involvement in Salomon Brothers' treasury scandal, and then attracted investors to JWM Partners after Long Term Capital's spectacular failure. The same relaxed standards of misconduct are sometimes applied to people at lower levels of society too; observers may be relatively tolerant of the poor person who steals food for his or her family or who gives up on paying his or her medical bills. Indeed, a quote from the Bible touts, “Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving” (Proverbs 6:30 New International Version).

Research on moral licensing has begun to examine the conditions under which people are free to engage in immoral and unethical

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* Corresponding author at: Grainger Hall, Wisconsin School of Business, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 975 University Ave., Madison, WI 53706, USA.

E-mail address: epolman@bus.wisc.edu (E. Polman).

behavior (e.g., Cain, Loewenstein, & Moore, 2005, 2011; Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009; Effron, Miller, & Monin, 2012; Effron & Monin, 2010; Effron, Monin, & Miller, 2012; Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Merritt et al., 2012; Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva, Ilic, & Medin, 2009; Zhong, Ku, Lount, & Murnighan, 2010). Much of this research concerns moral self-licensing, which takes the perspective of the wrongdoer to identify why people tolerate problematic behaviors in themselves. For example, people are more willing to behave unethically after they have engaged in virtuous behaviors, such as feeling free to behave in a prejudiced manner after they have had an opportunity to express non-sexist attitudes (Monin & Miller, 2001). Much less well understood is third party licensing, in which people tolerate the misbehavior they observe in others (Effron & Monin, 2010). What factors influence observers' willingness to license misdeeds in others?

Social status considerations naturally lend themselves to any exploration of how people judge others' dubious behavior. Status is the respect, prestige, and admiration that individuals enjoy in the eyes of others (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Krings, 2001; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995)—furthermore, judgments of others are inexorably tied to status because social hierarchies are based on a consensual collection of beliefs about the relative value each member brings to the group (for a review, see Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). While one's status is initially determined by inferences drawn about one's value through observed behaviors and characteristics (e.g., Berger, Fiske, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Ridgeway, 1991), subsequent behaviors are judged with the status of the actor in mind (e.g., Bowles & Gelfand, 2010; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Tiedens, 2001). That is, although moral violations are generally reprehensible, the willingness to license such violations may be colored, in part, by the wrongdoer's status.

While existing literature has yet to consider the relationship between status and moral licensing, some work suggests that a person's status helps shape how others perceive and react to their actions. It is difficult to draw clear conclusions from this literature, however, because it virtually ignores the effect of low status on sanctioning of norm violations and is equivocal regarding whether high status elicits more or less sanctioning. On the one hand, high status appears to be associated with social approval expressed in a variety of ways. For example, high status individuals receive more flattering assessments of their performance, competence, and warmth (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Berger et al., 1980; Fiske et al., 2002; Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011), and even stand to reap the most benefits and disproportionately greater credit for successful collective efforts (e.g., the “Matthew Effect”; Merton, 1968). In addition, high status individuals are granted greater decision-making authority and control over group processes than their lower status counterparts (Bales, 1950; Belliveau, O'Reilly, & Wade, 1996; Berger et al., 1980; Judge & Cable, 2004). With regard to the effect of status on responses to problematic behavior, people tend to grant high status individuals goodwill that subsequently causes their transgressions to be perceived as less inappropriate (Hollander, 1958), and even more normative (Giordano, 1983). For example, Hollander suggests that dubious behaviors by high status individuals “bring about their reconstruction” among judges (p. 125)—in other words, their reinterpretation. On the other hand, recent work (Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009) suggests that people assume high status individuals' behaviors demonstrate more intentionality and deliberation, and therefore judge high status individuals more harshly (i.e., high status individuals are viewed as more responsible for the consequences of their actions).

The same equivocal exists with respect to whether a wrongdoer's low status makes their norm violations more or less acceptable. On the one hand, lacking status is likely to be associated with social disapproval; low status individuals such as minorities, women and the homeless are often disrespected, stigmatized and negatively stereotyped (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; Zick, Pettigrew,

& Wagner, 2008). On the other hand, people described as low status often elicit sympathy, compassion, pity, and charity from others (Gans, 1972; Gino & Pierce, 2009; Weiner, Osborne, & Rudolph, 2011). For example, Gino and Pierce (2010) found that car inspectors were more likely to illegally pass customers whose cars should have failed an emission test if their cars were “poor looking” than if they were luxury vehicles; presumably because these inspectors empathized with the drivers' low status. Moreover, recent research has examined the leniency of moral judgments and found that low status individuals, in comparison to high status individuals, receive more favorable punishments (Fragale et al., 2009), particularly when the severity of their transgressions is high (Karelaia & Keck, in preparation). The above suggests that the sympathy individuals often receive by virtue of their low status could, paradoxically, highlight a benefit of being low status—namely, the conferral of an occasional benevolent handout (i.e., an “emotional gift”) from others. That is, observers may relax their standards when judging low status others because “they've suffered enough.”

By examining observers' judgments of both high and low status individuals, this research demonstrates the conditions under which status (high or low) will generate a moral license. Specifically, we contend that both high and low status can increase moral licensing, but through different mechanisms. Relative to a control, the high status of wrongdoers increases observers' propensity to view their misdeeds in a positive light (i.e., goodwill) and thus the amount of *moral credentials* they are granted by observers, while the low status of wrongdoers increases the level of sympathy and thus the amount of *moral credits* they are granted. These notions of credentials and credits drawn from the moral licensing literature are reviewed in the following section.

Credentials, credits, and status

Prior work suggests that moral license may take one of two forms: credentials and credits (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010). While credentials and credits similarly elicit less negative responses to misbehavior, they differ with respect to whether they alter observers' perception of the negativity of the behavior itself (a form of perceptual change) or merely affect observers' perception of the extent to which engaging in negative behavior is understandable or justified (a form of attitudinal change). Credentials bias perceptions of norm-violating behavior, leading people to perceive dubious behavior as less dubious; almost as if the behavior was not even a transgression (Effron & Monin, 2010). For example, credentials may lead observers to perceive someone pushing another person as an attempt to save him or her from harm rather than as an aggressive act, and it is because the behavior itself is evaluated positively that it is treated as acceptable. Credits, however, do not change observers' perception of the behavior but offer counterbalancing capital so that a wrongdoer can transgress as long as their transgressions (so-called *moral debits*; Miller & Effron, 2010) do not exceed their credits (Nisan, 1991; Zhong, Liljenquist, & Cain, 2009). Thus, credits influence the extent to which observers sanction misbehavior by altering their attitudes toward the wrongdoing, such as viewing the wrongdoing as justified and tolerable. For example, stealing from the rich may be recognized as a transgression (rather than reframed as “encouraging donations”) and this transgression may be tolerated as long as the wrongdoer also gives to the poor, thus generating a social currency capable of counterbalancing the wrongdoing. In other words, credentials change people's perceptions of dubious behavior whereas credits represent a balance of metaphorical, discrete units that can be drawn upon to transgress without incurring condemnation. Although both credentials and credits lead to less punishment (i.e., more licensing), they differ in how dubious behavior is construed—favorably in the case of credentials but unbiased (that is, unfavorably) in the case of credits.

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