

# Status and the Evaluation of Workplace Deviance

Hannah Riley Bowles<sup>1</sup> and Michele Gelfand<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Harvard University and <sup>2</sup>University of Maryland

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## Abstract

Bias in the evaluation of workplace misbehavior is hotly debated in courts and corporations, but it has received little empirical attention. Classic sociological literature suggests that deviance by lower-status actors will be evaluated more harshly than deviance by higher-status actors. However, more recent psychological literature suggests that discrimination in the evaluation of misbehavior may be moderated by the relative status of the evaluator because status influences both rule observance and attitudes toward social hierarchy. In Study 1, the psychological experience of higher status decreased rule observance and increased preferences for social hierarchy, as we theorized. In three subsequent experiments, we tested the hypothesis that higher-status evaluators would be more discriminating in their evaluations of workplace misbehavior, evaluating fellow higher-status deviants more leniently than lower-status deviants. Results supported the hypothesized interactive effect of evaluator status and target status on the evaluation of workplace deviance, when both achieved status characteristics (Studies 2a and 2b) and ascribed status characteristics (i.e., race and gender in Study 3) were manipulated.

## Keywords

workplace deviance, gender, race, sex, status characteristics, evaluation, discrimination

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Threatening the largest civil rights class-action suit in American history, Betty Dukes seeks to represent 1.6 million female employees of Wal-Mart in a sex-discrimination charge (*Dukes v. Wal-Mart*, 2004, under appeal). One claim she makes is that sex-discriminatory disciplinary actions impeded women's advancement because managers wrote up female employees for behaviors tolerated from male employees (e.g., returning late from breaks). Despite active debate in courts and in corporate corridors, academics have paid little attention to questions of bias in the evaluation of workplace misbehavior.

Scholars of workplace deviance acknowledge that evaluations of norm-violating behaviors are fundamentally subjective (Bennett & Robinson, 2003) and shaped by dominant coalitions within organizations (Bennett, Aquino, Reed, & Thau, 2005). Yet the emphasis within this blossoming field has been on validating the "workplace deviance" construct (Dalal, 2005; Robinson & Bennett, 1995), identifying its antecedents and consequences (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007), and proposing preventive measures (Vardi & Weitz, 2004). We argue that more attention should be paid to the subjectivity in evaluating workplace deviance, in part because of the potential for discrimination, but, more important, because illuminating the gray areas of workplace deviance

reveals another way in which psychological processes reinforce status hierarchies in organizations.

## Evaluating Deviance

Sociologists have long argued that greater conformity to group norms is demanded of lower-status group members (Hollander, 1958; Homans, 1950) and that the labeling of "deviant" behavior is a tool for higher-status-group members to maintain their dominance (Marx & Engels, 1994). Studying "social outsiders," Becker (1963) demonstrated how lower-status actors receive more severe social sanctions for the same rule infractions. Focusing on gender, Schur (1983) elucidated how women's lower status relative to men makes them more vulnerable to the "deviant" label, and how this threat of being labeled reinforces women's social subordination.

This sociological research suggests a main effect of target status on the evaluation of workplace deviance, with

### Corresponding Author:

Hannah Riley Bowles, Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, 79 JFK St., Cambridge, MA 02138  
 E-mail: [hannah\\_bowles@harvard.edu](mailto:hannah_bowles@harvard.edu)

lower-status actors being evaluated more harshly than higher-status actors. However, more recent psychological research suggests that evaluators' status may moderate this classic target-status effect, such that the deviant's status has a greater biasing effect among higher- than lower-status evaluators.

Research on the psychology of social dominance shows that members of higher-status social groups (e.g., men vs. women, racial majorities vs. minorities) tend to espouse more hierarchy-enhancing beliefs (e.g., that some people are more deserving of privileges than others). In contrast, members of lower-status social groups tend to espouse more status-attenuating beliefs, such as ideals of equal treatment (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Similarly, research on in-group bias indicates that high-status groups display greater in-group favoritism than do low-status groups, presumably because members of higher-status groups have greater motivation to preserve their place in the social hierarchy (Bettencourt, Charlton, Dorr, & Hume, 2001; Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992; Pettigrew, 1979).

Status also influences the propensity toward rule abidance because higher social status generally permits greater self-direction in one's behavior and pursuits (Hollander, 1958; Kohn, 1977). Greater conformity is demanded of lower-status group members, and they in turn tend to be more strictly rule oriented with regard to discipline (Kohn, 1977). Indeed, even the psychological experience of being in a lower-power position makes actors attend more to social norms (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003).

Motivated by this sociological and psychological research, we hypothesized that the evaluator's status and the target's status would interact in influencing the evaluation of workplace deviance. We predicted that members of higher-status groups would be more discriminating in their evaluations than members of lower-status groups and more lenient toward misbehavior by members of higher-status groups—consciously or unconsciously protecting their privileged status. We tested this hypothesis in three studies in which status was manipulated by varying achievement (Studies 2a and b) or by varying ascribed status characteristics (Study 3), but first we examined whether the psychological experience of status has the theorized effects on social dominance and rule observance.

## Study 1: Effect of Status on Rule Compliance and Social Dominance

### Method

**Participants and design.** Two hundred fifteen American adults with work experience (107 men and 108 women; mean work experience = 11.83 years) completed an on-line survey through a market-research firm. Participants were randomly assigned to the high- or low-status condition.

**Procedure.** Participants completed a two-part survey. In Part I, we manipulated the psychological experience of status using an

adapted version of Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee's (2003) psychological experience of power. Our manipulation emphasized "the amount of respect accorded by others" as opposed to the "amount of resources [one] controls" (Magee & Galinsky, 2008, p. 359, on status vs. power). We asked participants in the high-status condition to recall a specific situation in which "others looked up to you and deferred to your opinion" because "you were in a high-ranking position" or "had a lot of experience or competence." Conversely, we asked participants in the low-status condition to recall a specific situation in which "you looked up to others and deferred to their opinion" because "you were in a low-ranking position" or "lacked experience or competence." Participants were instructed to describe what happened and how they felt in the situation.

In Part II, participants answered questions about how they would behave and feel in a high- or low-status role at work (i.e., executive vs. entry-level position); the named role corresponded to each participant's assigned condition in Part I. The questions included a three-item measure of rule compliance from the "dutifulness" subcomponent of the Big Five (Goldberg, 1990; "follow directions," "stick to the rules," "disregard the rules," the latter being reverse-coded) and an eight-item measure of social dominance adapted from Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle (1994; e.g., "some employees are just more worthy than others of recognition" and "it is important that we treat other employees as equals," the latter being reverse-coded).

## Results

The results supported the theorized effects of the psychological experience of status on rule orientation and social dominance. Participants in the high-status condition reported lower rule compliance ( $M = 5.71$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) than participants in the low-status condition ( $M = 6.26$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ),  $t(213) = 4.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.58$ . Participants in the high-status condition also reported higher social dominance ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) than participants in the low-status condition ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ),  $t(213) = 2.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.38$ .

## Study 2a: Effect of Achieved Status on Evaluation of Workplace Deviance

In Study 2a, we tested whether the psychological experience of status would influence evaluations of workplace misbehavior by high- and low-status targets. We manipulated target status by varying organizational standing (rank, tenure) and regard (professional accomplishment), which are classic indicators of social status (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Hollander, 1958).

### Method

**Participants and design.** Two hundred eighty-one American adults with work experience (138 men and 143 women; mean

work experience = 16.85 years) completed an on-line survey through a market-research firm. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (evaluator status: high or low)  $\times$  2 (target status: high or low) between-subjects design.

**Procedure.** Participants completed a two-part survey. In Part I, we manipulated evaluator status using the same procedure described in Study 1. In Part II, participants evaluated a male employee who had been “mailing personal letters and packages at the company’s expense.” The employee was described either as a “well-regarded” executive with a long track record of performance (high-status target) or as a “not well-known” staff assistant with little track record (low-status target). After completing their evaluations, participants rated the target’s organizational status on a 7-point scale (from 1, *very low ranking*, to 7, *very high ranking*) in order to check their comprehension of this manipulation.

Participants used a 7-point scale to indicate their agreement or disagreement with five items describing how the employee’s boss should respond to the target’s behavior: “take some kind of formal action against him (e.g., formal reprimand, punishment),” “give him the benefit of the doubt” (reverse-coded), “deal with the situation privately and informally” (reverse-coded), “this behavior should be punished,” and “this behavior would not worry me personally” (reverse-coded). We combined the ratings by averaging them to form a composite score for the *propensity to punish* ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

## Results

Participants in the high-status-target condition rated the employee as higher ranking ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) than did participants in the low-status-target condition ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ),  $t(279) = 20.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.45$ . An analysis of variance of the propensity to punish showed no main effect of evaluator status,  $F(1, 277) = 0.34$ ,  $p = .56$ ,  $\eta^2 = .001$ ; a significant main effect for target status,  $F(1, 277) = 4.41$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ ; and a significant Evaluator Status  $\times$  Target Status

interaction,  $F(1, 277) = 8.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . As the left-hand panel of Figure 1 illustrates, the results supported our predictions. High-status evaluators were more inclined to punish the low-status target than the high-status target,  $t(144) = 3.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.59$ , whereas low-status evaluators were prone to treat high- and low-status targets equally,  $t(133) = 0.57$ ,  $p = .57$ ,  $d = 0.10$ .

## Study 2b: Effect of Achieved Status on Evaluation of Workplace Deviance

Study 2b was a replication of Study 2a, except that we restricted the manipulation of target status to high or low professional regard.

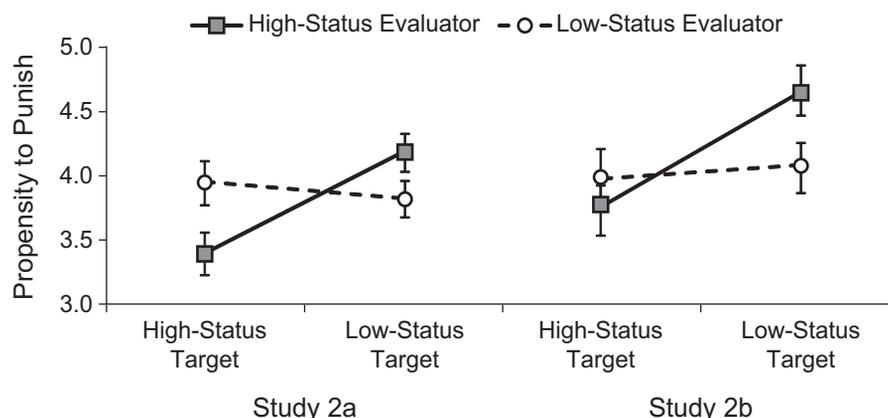
### Method

**Participants and design.** Participants were 174 American adults with work experience (76 men and 98 women; mean work experience = 17.15 years).

**Procedure.** The procedure was the same as in Study 2a, with the exception that the target was an information technology manager who had “a strong track record” and was “very well regarded . . . for his technical expertise” (high-status target) or who had “little track record” and “not . . . much of a reputation for technical expertise” (low-status target). Participants rated the target’s status on a 7-point scale (from 1, *very low regard in terms of his technical expertise*, to 7, *very high regard in terms of his technical expertise*).

## Results

Participants in the high-status-target condition rated the employee as held in higher regard ( $M = 5.78$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) than did participants in the low-status-target condition ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ),  $t(172) = 15.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.45$ . An analysis of variance of the propensity-to-punish composite score ( $\alpha = .75$ )



**Fig. 1.** Results from Studies 2a and 2b: mean propensity to punish workplace deviance as a function of evaluator status and target status. Error bars indicate  $\pm 1$  SE.

showed no main effect for evaluator status,  $F(1, 170) = 0.86$ ,  $p = .36$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ ; a significant main effect for target status,  $F(1, 170) = 6.34$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ; and a significant Evaluator Status  $\times$  Target Status interaction,  $F(1, 170) = 3.95$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . As the right-hand panel in Figure 1 illustrates, high-status evaluators again were more inclined to punish the low-status target than the high-status target,  $t(85) = 3.37$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.73$ , whereas low-status evaluators were not,  $t(85) = 0.36$ ,  $p = .72$ ,  $d = 0.08$ .

### Study 3: Effect of Ascribed Status on Evaluation of Workplace Deviance

In Study 3, we tested our hypotheses on a range of behaviors previously validated as examples of workplace deviance. Taking inspiration from *Dukes v. Wal-Mart*, we also tested whether the pattern of effects observed in Studies 2a and b would apply to ascribed status categories (viz., gender, race). Gender and race are classic examples of diffuse status characteristics, with men generally ascribed higher status than women (Eagly & Wood, 1982; Ridgeway, 2001) and Whites higher status than Blacks (Berger et al., 1977; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001).

#### Method

**Participants and design.** One hundred fifty-nine White American adults with work experience (43 men and 116 women; mean work experience = 15.48 years) completed an on-line survey. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four target-identity conditions in a 2 (evaluator gender: male or female)  $\times$  2 (target race: White or Black)  $\times$  2 (target gender: male or female) design.

**Procedure.** Participants adopted the role of managers at a commercial bank evaluating an employee. Materials indicated that the employee had a college degree, work experience, and a good performance record. Participants were instructed to evaluate 10 deviant workplace behaviors, treating each one as if it was the only negative information they had about the employee. For each behavior, participants used a 7-point scale to indicate their agreement with the following statements: "This behavior represents a serious violation" (*seriousness rating*) and "this behavior should be punished" (*punish rating*).

The 10 behaviors were drawn from Robinson and Bennett's (1995) typology of workplace deviance and were representative of "major" acts of workplace deviance according to their multidimensional-scaling map. The behaviors included were (in order of increasing severity) "went against [his or her] boss's decision," "covered up mistakes," "lied about hours worked," "endangered coworkers by reckless behavior," "sexually harassed a fellow coworker," "stole bank equipment or merchandise," "sabotaged bank equipment or merchandise," "stole a coworker's possessions," "verbally abused customers," and "physically abused a customer." We presented the

behaviors in two random orders across all of the conditions and observed no order effects.

We manipulated target gender using stereotypically male and female names and pronouns. We manipulated target race using Black- and White-identified names for each sex (Black: Jamal, Latoya; White: Greg, Kristen; see Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). For example, the description might say, "Jamal went against his boss's decision." After completing their evaluations, all participants in the sample categorized the target's gender and race as intended.

#### Results

The seriousness and punish ratings were strongly correlated to each other, mean  $r = .62$ , so we averaged the ratings for each behavior and then combined these mean ratings into one overall mean composite score indexing the propensity to punish workplace deviance ( $\alpha = .76$ ). We observed significant main effects for target gender,  $F(1, 151) = 5.76$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ , and target race,  $F(1, 151) = 5.84$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . These main effects were qualified by two-way interactions of evaluator gender and target gender,  $F(1, 151) = 4.99$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ , and of evaluator gender and target race,  $F(1, 151) = 6.41$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . No other effects were significant,  $F_s(1, 151) < 0.85$ .

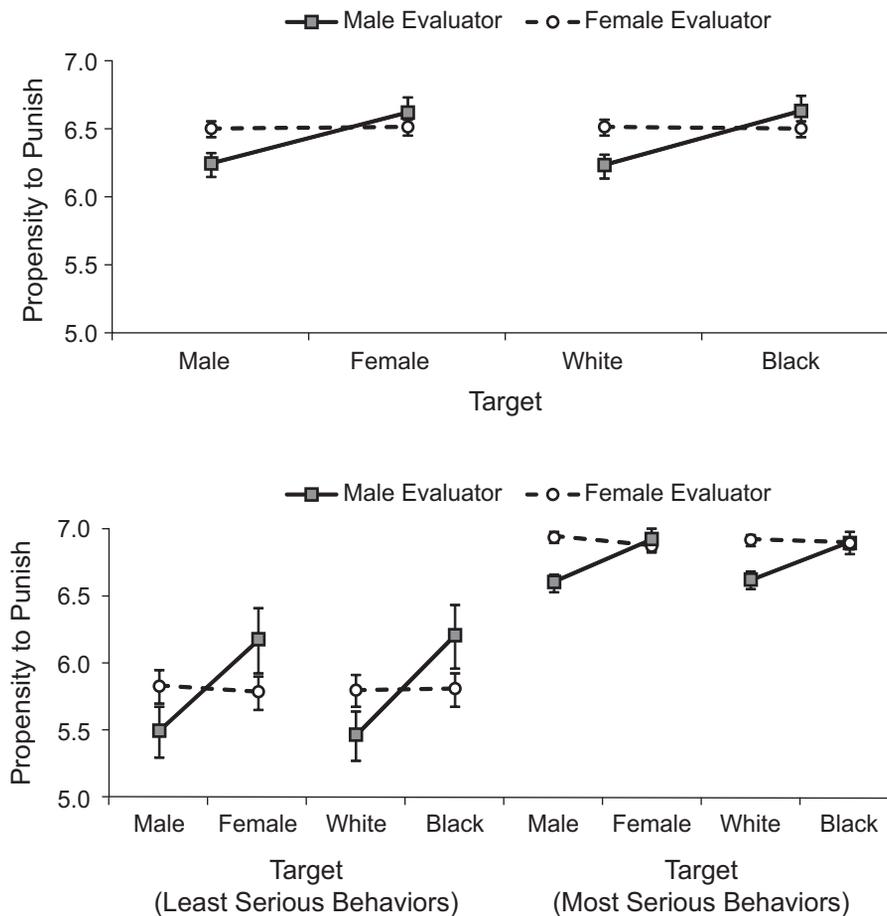
As the top panel of Figure 2 illustrates, the results supported our predictions. White men evaluated male deviance more leniently than female deviance,  $F(1, 40) = 6.04$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .13$ , and White deviance more leniently than Black deviance,  $F(1, 40) = 6.62$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .14$ . In contrast, White female evaluators demonstrated more equal treatment,  $F_s < 0.04$ .

To explore whether the female evaluators' lack of bias might be explained by a ceiling effect, we replicated our analyses using as our dependent variables the propensity to punish the three least serious behaviors and the propensity to punish the three most serious behaviors (as listed in the Method section). As the bottom panel of Figure 2 illustrates, the interaction effects remained significant for the least and most serious behaviors,  $F_s(1, 151) \geq 4.33$ ,  $p < .04$ ,  $\eta^2 \geq .04$ , and there was no shift in the evenhandedness of women's evaluations.

#### General Discussion

These experimental results support claims that status-linked social identities, such as gender, do indeed influence the evaluation of workplace deviance. Consistent with classic sociological theory, our studies indicate that biases in the evaluation of workplace deviance reinforce the social hierarchy by granting more lenience to individuals of higher status. However, the status of the evaluator moderated this effect: Evaluators with higher status were significantly more prone to biased evaluation of misbehavior than those with lower status.

These findings have important implications for research and practice. They challenge scholars to explore more systematically the subjective labeling of deviance in the workplace. They contribute theoretically to the integration of sociological



**Fig. 2.** Results from Study 3: mean propensity to punish workplace deviance as a function of evaluator gender, target gender, and target race. Results are shown for all 10 behaviors combined (top panel) and for the 3 least serious behaviors and 3 most serious behaviors (bottom panel). Error bars indicate  $\pm 1$  SE.

and psychological perspectives on status and the reinforcement of social hierarchy. For organizations and the courts, they suggest an explanation for hotly debated claims of discrimination in the evaluation of workplace misbehavior.

These studies are, however, just a starting point. Future field research could investigate how such biases manifest themselves in organizational outcomes. Future experimental research could test for boundary conditions, such as when deviance evokes specific status-linked stereotypes (Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009), transgresses central values of the evaluator’s status category (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988), or has different consequences depending on the deviant’s status (Giordano, 1983). There is rich potential in exploring the gray areas of workplace misbehavior, both for understanding the psychology of norm conformity and for understanding the reinforcement of social hierarchy.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interests with respect to their authorship and/or the publication of this article.

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