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Social Class and Perceptions of Unethical Behavior in an Organizational Setting

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore whether social class of third-party adjudicators or perpetrators affected punitive decision-making in unethical workplace scenarios. It was hypothesized that third-party adjudicators would grant leniency towards lower-class perpetrators as well as towards perpetrators who shared their own social class. Results showed that there was no significant difference in the perception and assignment of punishment for different social class perpetrators, nor did the results show that leniency was granted to perpetrators who shared adjudicators' social class. Although the study did not confirm the initial hypotheses, unexpected trends did arise within the study and are discussed in this paper.

Key words: Social class background, punishment, unethical workplace behavior

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Introduction

The discrepancies in criminal sentencing for individuals from differing demographics who are found guilty of perpetrating a crime has been a widespread topic of study, especially considering the fluctuations of the legal framework around sentencing guidelines in the last fifty years. With legal proceedings and their rulings having finality over a guilty individual's life for a substantive period of time, it comes as no surprise the depth of the research performed on the topic. The perception and adjudication of punishment has been a focal point for legal scholars since the first court was in session. In a complimentary way, businesses and their leadership have sought the best methods for punishing unwanted or unethical behavior by their employees.

The courts still have their issues, too. According to recent studies, there are still disparities in sentencing among white and black males who commit the same crime with the same criminal history with black males receiving harsher sentences for the same crime (Rhodes, 2015). These disparities may be linked to racism in either the judicial or prosecutorial decision-making, but the researchers also specify their findings' inability to prove systemic ill-intent (Rhodes, 2015). Instead, they present the possibility that judges use certain factors to lessen punitive measures, and white males typically exceed black males in these factors such as education, income, and demeanor (Rhodes, 2015). This conclusion ties with other scholarly work in Ohio, which observed that convicted felons were more likely to receive nonsuspended prison sentences when they were from more disadvantaged areas regardless of race (Wooldredge, 2007).

Studies have also found that lean male jurors are more likely to find obese women guilty of crimes than their lean counterparts (Schvey, 2013). Not only were they more likely to find obese women guilty, they were more likely to believe she had prior knowledge of her

wrongdoing and was more likely to commit the same act (check fraud) again. Although anti-fat sentiment is creating the inequity, poorer women are disproportionately affected by this sentiment. Obesity rates within the lowest wage-earners are significantly higher than those in the highest wage-earners. Although their social class is not the driving factor, it is a contributing factor in their inequity. Direct discrimination is not as clear cut as disenfranchisement.

A wrongdoers socioeconomic standing is a factor for sentence length in the eyes of the court, either consciously or unconsciously. In a similar scenario, the discipline assigned to a transgression in a workplace is expected to have a similar socioeconomic bias arise. This paper does not attempt to further clarify the moral quandaries concerning the court's or businessman's consideration of these socioeconomic factors but seeks to parallel the existing legal studies' proof these factors exist and the magnitude of their influence on punishment in the workplace.

Literature Review

Ethical decision-making processes do not operate in a vacuum. They are impacted by the immediate environment surrounding an individual and an individual's formative years and current social standing where values were and are being instilled. The environment being considered is the workplace, a hierarchical entity with its own tendencies towards distributing justice and fairness. Social class, the influencer being studied, is a major contributor in shaping moral socialization for a person's whole life with social classes commonly being broken into five general classes: lower, lower-middle, middle, upper-middle, and upper. Both the workplace setting and social class shape the perception and assignment of punishment – “the administration of an aversive response or the removal of a desired response following an undesirable behavior” (Bauman, 2016).

Punishment

To understand how social class may influence the perception and assignment of punishment, it is first important to understand the initial thought processes in determining a fitting punishment for a wrongdoing. Psychologically, people expect several conditions to be met when someone transgresses to perceive 'justice' was served. These conditions are different from individual to individual but can be broadly described. Two main systems of justice to which people typically subscribe are retributive justice and restorative justice. Retributive justice is enshrined in our own justice system, focusing on punishing wrongdoers and deterring potential future wrongdoing by displaying a no-tolerance attitude towards those who break community laws or values (Gromet, 2009). Restorative justice is another means of addressing transgressions; it is not mutually exclusive to retributive justice but certainly has different goals. Restorative justice seeks to bring all affected parties together to reach conclusions on where the harm has been done. From there, the procedure seeks to 'restore' the victim(s) and community back to its 'pre-transgression' state and reintegrate the perpetrator back into society (Gromet, 2009). Retributive justice is logically easier to adjudicate - a sentence is given depending on the level of wrongdoing, and the case closes. Both the courts and businesses display this form of justice, with felons receiving prison time and unethical workers' employments being terminated. Restorative justice has grown in popularity with rehabilitation and mass incarceration being frequent talking points in current politics. It has been shown people consider both forms of justice when given the opportunity to focus on all affected parties, but still prioritize punishing the transgressor over anything else (Gromet, 2009). Individual differences in verdicts and punishment severity can be partially explained by people's own tendencies towards one of these two justice systems.

Like the two justice systems, initial justice-providing reactions to a transgression typically fall into two broad categories: compensation for the victim and punishment for the perpetrator (Darley, 2003). These reactions are mostly due to the intentionality of the transgression. Compensation for the victim is the initial reaction when the act is unintentional. For example, if a series of unforeseeable coincidences caused person A's parked car to careen downhill and dent person B's truck, it would invoke a compensatory justice reaction from third parties. Person A certainly owes person B for the cost of the damages, but because the act was entirely out of his/her control, and he/she was assumedly not being negligent, justice does not require more than compensation. Now, if person A purposefully stole money from person B, the justice reaction would not only be for person A to return the funds to person B, but also for person A to be punished. Intentionally committing a heinous act is perceived to deserve more than compensation; it is perceived to deserve some form of retribution. More complex cases are where individuals are negligently committing a transgression or acting in a reckless manner that causes a transgression. Justice reactions trend from compensation to punishment as the severity of the negligence or recklessness increases (Darley, 2003). Perceived intentionality is another individual factor that can influence and frame punishment decisions.

The perceived harshness of punishment a specific individual will receive is also logically tied to their previous actions. If the person has a history of being morally reprehensible, people are more likely to prescribe a harsher punishment as well as have fewer moral qualms when a severe punishment is inflicted on the individual (Drolet, 2016).

Social Class & Ingroups

More pressing to the potential influence of social classes on punishment than individual differences, group dynamics can play a role in how a wrongdoing is punished especially in an

organizational setting. In a business, reprimands are both formal and informal. A manager or another authority figure will assign a specific punishment equal to the wrongdoing committed by an employee, usually based on existing policy. Additionally, the employee may be ostracized, sabotaged, or scolded by his/her peers for the wrongdoing – peers who have no hierarchical authority over the transgressor (Bauman, 2016). Hierarchical placement has been proven to influence people's perception of blame, expecting higher ranking employees to behave at a greater standard and desiring greater punitive measures for wrongdoing at their elevated level (Bauman, 2016). This higher standard effect is related to the perception that higher level employees have more discretion over their own decision-making than someone just following instructions, thus they are more responsible for their own actions. Authority figures are perceived to have greater intentionality in transgressing. Lower level employees are also given leniency in perceived punishment if they perform unethical behavior that is similar to an unethical action a superior did recently, not faulting the lower level employee for the supposed influence of a bad role model (Bauman, 2016).

When comparing between ingroup and outgroup leaders, people view transgressions by ingroup leaders as less offensive and are more willing to give them a pass on their wrongdoing (Abrams, 2013). Leaders are 'ingroup leaders' when they represent the "group prototype – its distinctive differences from relevant groups." These distinctive differences can be common thought processes, goals, belief systems, or more shallowly race and socioeconomic standing. An example of a group member giving an ingroup leader a pass on a transgression would be when a sports team's captain takes an unconventional shot to win a game; he/she misses, but the team members aren't overly frustrated with the player for the shot. Now if the same team members were to watch a different team's captain attempt the same shot and miss, they wouldn't be near

as lenient on the criticism. They are giving their team captain a “transgression credit” (Abrams, 2013). Their captain is an ingroup leader; the other team’s captain is an outgroup leader. This is an extreme scenario in that the two leaders are directly competing against each other for success, but businesses units also have certain leaders that better represent the employees, either in values, work ethic, management style, race, or social class. Although a pass may be given specifically to ingroup *leaders*, ingroup *members* are actually held to a higher standard than outgroup members (Pinto, 2010). Deviant behavior from these members are the most catastrophic to maintaining positive group image and balanced group norms, so they are met with increased derision. Additionally, third-party members who share group membership with the victim of an act are more likely to punish outgroup perpetrators more harshly than ingroup perpetrators because of both ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination (Schiller, 2014). The third-party study may seem to run counter to the previous study showing the rigidity of punishment toward ingroup members, but the position of the judging member, either second-party or third-party is the important distinction. Those being directly affected by the deviant behavior in the ingroup will hold the perpetrator to a higher standard, but those that are looking in from the outside will give leniency toward the ingroup to not denigrate their own group’s standing. The third-party perspective is the more relevant psychological point for how our own study has been conducted.

Now, ingroup biases are influential only if social class is psychologically perceived as a group – something people can belong to, identify with, and exclude others from. There has been research published that displays people’s own feeling of belonging to a specific social class. Those from lower socioeconomic standing have been proven to show greater levels of depersonalized trust towards individuals from the same social standing (Navarro-Carrillo, 2018).

With no previous knowledge of an individual other than their location on the social totem pole, lower social class people will trust that individual more if they share the same social class. Psychologically, this bias makes sense. You are more likely to trust someone who you perceive has suffered the same problems as yourself. The increase in depersonalized trust for ingroup members is pervasive even when it has been shown that lower/working class individuals are far less likely to identify themselves in terms of socioeconomic status, focusing on interdependent self-concepts when compared with their middle-class counterparts (Manstead, 2018). The translation of this increase in socioeconomic ingroup trust into the assignment of punishment is largely unclear in the business setting. In parallel, studies on juror bias have shown that, in general, jurors prescribe harsher punishments to lower socioeconomic defendants with additional ties to attractiveness and race, but the influence of jurors own socioeconomic status on sentencing has not been studied significantly (Fullmer, 2014). However, socioeconomic ingroup biases have been proven to exist in decision-making, and the perception and assignment of punishment is a decision that has been historically influenced by ingroup biases.

Hypothesis

Based on my review of the existing literature on punishment, ingroup biases, and social class, I propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals will recommend less punitive measures for perpetrators of unethical workplace behavior of similar socioeconomic status to themselves.

Hypothesis 2: In general, individuals will prescribe more severe punishment to lower socioeconomic perpetrators.

Methodology

Sample

The sample was made up of 173 undergraduate students from the University of Arkansas. The demographic makeup of this sample included 47% men and 53% women with 96% of the respondents falling between the ages of 18 and 24. Seventy nine percent of the participants reported a current income level of less than \$10,000. Regarding social class background, 2% of participants came from a lower-class background, 12% of participants came from a lower-middle class background, 33% of participants came from a middle class background, 47% came from an upper-middle class background, and 6% came from an upper class background.

Procedure

Data was collected over a two-week period using two online surveys (see Appendix for survey questions), administered simultaneously. Survey 1 was given to business majors, and an identical survey Survey 2 was given to mechanical engineering majors; however, the population of participants for the engineering survey was far lower than the business majors and was ultimately not included in data analysis for simplicity. Before the surveys were administered, an email was sent to three business professors requesting that they offer their students extra course credit for taking the survey; all three professors thankfully accepted the offer. The professors announced the extra credit opportunity to their classes and emailed the details of the surveys to the students, including the links needed to access the survey and the deadlines for completing each survey. The students were also given the option to complete an alternative assignment for extra course credit if they chose not to participate. The survey introduction informed the students of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, in addition to the voluntary nature of the survey. In order to link the survey response to the bonus points being offered, respondents

provided their first, middle, and last initial, as well as the last four digits of their university Student ID. This information was used solely to match the survey respondents with their earned bonus points and was not retained as part of the final data set.

Measures

Unethical Behavior Vignettes. Four unethical workplace behavior vignettes were written to mirror existing vignettes on specific unethical workplace behaviors (Bucar, 2003). To limit the participants' biases to solely the perpetrating party, all unethical behaviors were 'victimless,' meaning there was no individual employee directly affected by the transgression. The actions were hurting the company or work unit broadly.

Social Class Biasing. In the survey, participants were asked to scale the wrongdoing and the rightful punishment for four distinct, but similar transgressions committed by an employee of two different socioeconomic classes in a workplace. It was important to distinguish the social class of the theoretical employee implicitly, so biases and opinions could be honestly observed. To accomplish this, differing images and names were used for the employee emblematic of certain social classes. Previous work has found that people are capable of inferring social class from images (Bjornsdottir, 2017). The risk with using images is that they can communicate rank in the company as well as social class and illicit different personal biases in individuals. In order to specifically reinforce the social class images, unethical behavior scenarios for both social class images were updated to include typical social class behaviors corresponding to the social class the image was provoking and mentioned nothing of job title. The lower/working class employee was "Joey Clark," and the middle/upper class employee was "Benjamin Cabot." To concretely gauge the participants' perception of the social class of the employee, participants were also asked to identify what they believed the social class of the employee was. This was done

immediately prior to survey completion to not influence the instinctive thought processes of respondents during the unethical workplace scenario sections. The images and unethical workplace scenario for each social class are below for a single vignette. For the complete differences, see the Appendix.



Upper Class Vignette 1: While at work, you overhear an employee, Benjamin Cabot, making long calls that are clearly not work related. He appears to be making calls to local **classical** music radio stations to enter contests for cash prizes, affecting his daily productivity. You expect this behavior to fade after a couple days, but your coworker continues to make unrelated calls for the next two weeks.

Lower Class Vignette 1: While at work, you overhear an employee, Joey Clark, making long calls that are clearly not work related. He appears to be making calls to local **country** radio stations to enter contests for cash prizes, affecting his daily productivity. You expect this behavior to fade after a couple days, but your coworker continues to make unrelated calls for the next two weeks.

Perception and Assignment of Punishment. It was important to know how unethically the employee was perceived initially before asking about the recommended punishment severity. Distinguishing between punishment leniency and lack of moral perception was necessary to understand results. Participants who did not view the employee as unethical and therefore did not invoke a harsher punishment option are not proof of the hypothesis. However, participants who *did* view the employee as unethical and still did not invoke a harsher punishment option reinforce the hypothesis. Initially, participants were asked to judge the ethicality of the action of

the individual first, before assigning punishment through a similar scale as well as a text response.

Social Class and General Demographics. Prior to the unethical workplace scenarios, general demographical information was taken of participants such as race, age, major, income range, and country of origin to potentially witness additional correlations not hypothesized originally. More relevantly, participants were also asked to identify their own current social class as well as the social class their family had when they were a child. Both were logged because childhood social class also affects thought processes, principles, and potentially socioeconomic ingroup identification (Manstead, 2018). Social classes were broken into the common five: lower, lower-middle, middle, upper-middle, and upper. It was also asked that social class standing be identified using a social ladder where higher rungs represent greater socioeconomic status. Established scales for moral character and moral disengagement were also included for additional comparison across social classes.

Analysis and Results

Table 1
Social Class Bivariate Correlations

		charact	Mdiseng	SevRate	EthRate	scJoey	scBen	curSCladder	chSCladder	CurSC	CHSC
Moral Character	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.136	.203*	-0.012	-0.184	-	0.121	.224**	0.074	-.294**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.096	0.013	0.884	0.108	0.615	0.130	0.005	0.361	0.000
	N	157	152	150	152	78	75	157	157	156	156
Moral Disengagement	Pearson Correlation	-0.136	1	-.257**	.277**	-0.092	0.176	-0.071	0.046	0.115	0.070
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.096		0.001	0.000	0.415	0.118	0.367	0.560	0.144	0.378
	N	152	164	158	160	81	80	164	164	163	163
Severity Rate	Pearson Correlation	.203*	-.257**	1	-.331**	0.010	-.273*	0.061	-0.026	-0.027	-0.083
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.013	0.001		0.000	0.927	0.014	0.441	0.740	0.732	0.296
	N	150	158	161	160	81	80	161	161	160	160
Ethical Rate	Pearson Correlation	-0.012	.277**	-.331**	1	0.051	0.158	-0.037	0.043	0.071	0.073
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.884	0.000	0.000		0.649	0.160	0.641	0.589	0.371	0.355
	N	152	160	160	163	82	81	163	163	162	162
Social Class Joey	Pearson Correlation	-0.184	-0.092	0.010	0.051	1	. ^c	-0.110	-.317**	-0.192	0.002
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.108	0.415	0.927	0.649			0.324	0.003	0.085	0.987
	N	78	81	81	82	83	0	83	83	82	82
Social Class Ben	Pearson Correlation	-0.059	0.176	-.273*	0.158	. ^c	1	0.054	-0.013	0.184	0.205
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.615	0.118	0.014	0.160			0.631	0.909	0.100	0.066
	N	75	80	80	81	0	81	81	81	81	81
Current Social Class Ladder	Pearson Correlation	0.121	-0.071	0.061	-0.037	-0.110	0.054	1	0.089	.385**	0.041
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.130	0.367	0.441	0.641	0.324	0.631		0.243	0.000	0.598
	N	157	164	161	163	83	81	173	173	170	170
Childhood Social Class Ladder	Pearson Correlation	.224**	0.046	-0.026	0.043	-.317**	-	0.089	1	.278**	0.087
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.005	0.560	0.740	0.589	0.003	0.909	0.243		0.000	0.261
	N	157	164	161	163	83	81	173	174	170	170
Current Social Class	Pearson Correlation	0.074	0.115	-0.027	0.071	-0.192	0.184	.385**	.278**	1	0.126
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.361	0.144	0.732	0.371	0.085	0.100	0.000	0.000		0.102
	N	156	163	160	162	82	81	170	170	170	169
Childhood Social Class	Pearson Correlation	-.294**	0.070	-0.083	0.073	0.002	0.205	0.041	0.087	0.126	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.378	0.296	0.355	0.987	0.066	0.598	0.261	0.102	
	N	156	163	160	162	82	81	170	170	169	170

Note. N = 173; *p<0.05; **p<.01; 2-tailed p-values are reported for bivariate correlations.

In Table 1 above, bivariate correlations between participant social class and perception of wrongdoing with the corresponding assignment of punishment are calculated. As the table shows, there is no significant correlation between the participant's current or childhood social class and their suggested punishment severity towards either individual. There was an inverse correlation between what social class participants believed Benjamin belonged and the severity of the punishment assigned to him with a correlation of -0.273.

Table 2
Grouped Statistics

Social Class Condition		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Severity Rate	Ben	80	3.1875	0.62453	0.06982
	Joey	81	3.1543	0.62820	0.06980
Ethical Rate	Ben	81	2.5556	0.84871	0.09430
	Joey	82	2.4817	0.81155	0.08962
Social Class Rate	Ben	81	2.4074	0.83333	0.09259
	Joey	83	1.9036	0.63658	0.06987

As observed in Table 2, participants were successfully distinguishing social class differences from the images and scenarios provided. With 1 being the lower social class and 5 being the higher, Joey was perceived to be lower to lower-middle class with an average value of 1.9036; Ben was perceived to be lower-middle to middle class with a value of 2.4074. The perceived difference between their social class was lower than what was anticipated and will be discussed later. Additionally, from mean data, Ben was perceived as committing a greater transgression and deserving of greater punishment than Joey. This is the direct inverse of Hypothesis 2 but is minimally significant as show in the following table.

Table 3
Independent T-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Severity Rate	Equal variances assumed	0.141	0.708	0.336	159	0.737	0.03318	0.09873	-0.16182	0.22818
	Equal variances not assumed			0.336	158.993	0.737	0.03318	0.09873	-0.16181	0.22817
Ethical Rate	Equal variances assumed	1.672	0.198	0.568	161	0.571	0.07385	0.13006	-0.18299	0.33069
	Equal variances not assumed			0.568	160.477	0.571	0.07385	0.13009	-0.18307	0.33077
Social Class Rate	Equal variances assumed	14.580	0.000	4.357	162	0.000	0.50379	0.11562	0.27547	0.73212
	Equal variances not assumed			4.343	149.697	0.000	0.50379	0.11600	0.27459	0.73300

An independent T-test was run with a 95% confidence interval to determine the significance of the differences in the means found in Table 2. As seen for both severity and ethical rate, significance values were well above 0.05, meaning the null hypothesis failed to be rejected – the differences between participants’ perception of wrongdoing and assignment of punishment for Joey and Ben were not statistically significant. The difference between Joey and Ben’s perceived social classes *were* significant though.

Discussion

This study sought to parallel existing studies and findings from legal proceedings on the effect of social class on punishment specifically for victimless, unethical workplace behavior. Furthermore, this study explored an additional source of bias, attempting to correlate participants' own social class with that of the perpetrator. If successful, this study may have provided another factor why certain employees are reprimanded differently for similar offenses in a workplace.

There was no evidence of Hypothesis 1 or 2 being true. Since there was no significant correlation, either direct or inverse, between participants' social class and their desired severity of punishment, it cannot be concluded that a third-party's social class will significantly affect their perceptions towards perpetrators of an unethical workplace behavior, even if the third-party member and the perpetrator share the same social class. Hypothesis 2 was also unsupported by the data. The perception of wrongdoing and the assignment of punishment were not statistically significant when comparing responses for Ben and Joey, meaning that both employees were viewed similarly regardless of social class. However, bivariate analysis did show that perceived social class of Ben and deserved punishment severity were related inversely, meaning that participants that believed Ben to be higher in social class (when compared to other Ben respondents) punished Ben less. Although it was not proven that lower social class individuals are punished harsher, this correlation may illustrate that those perceived to be higher in social strata are also perceived to deserve leniency in wrongdoing. Sadly, this was not an initial hypothesis, but it is consistent with the prediction that lower social class perpetrators receive no leniency in punishment decisions.

A large element of this study was predicated on the success of images and class-specific behavior to distinguish social class implicitly. It was found that the images and behavior were successful in distinguishing social classes; however, the social class difference was not pronounced. Mean responses were ranking Ben only 0.6 social strata above Joey, placing them practically in the same social class. The lack of pronouncement is very worrisome for the conclusions reached in this study and calls their validity into question. If participants were incapable of properly perceiving significant differences in social strata between Ben and Joey, they may not display any biases between them. If participants see both Ben and Joey as working-class people with small wealth differences, it could explain why both hypotheses were not confirmed by the survey – the regulating element was not strong enough. If similar studies were to be done in the future, images that are more greatly polarized toward lower- or upper-class people would need to be used to insure data usefulness.

Both Ben and Joey were also being perceived as lower social classes than was originally intended. Joey was intended to be a middle-class employee, and Ben was intended to be an upper-middle to upper-class employee. Participants placed Joey in the lower-middle class and Ben in the lower-middle to middle-class. To further confirm the inconsistency, a quick sister-study was done through Amazon’s MTURK survey technology that asked participants to solely identify the social class of both employees with just the image. The survey had over 100 respondents for each image.

Table 4
MTURK Social Class

Condition	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Social Class Rate Ben	103	4.11	0.685	0.067
Joey	100	3.28	0.792	0.079

Table 5
MTURK Significance

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Social Class Rate	Equal variances assumed	3.711	0.055	7.962	201	0.000	0.827	0.104	0.622	1.032
	Equal variances not assumed			7.944	195.070	0.000	0.827	0.104	0.622	1.032

As the previous tables illustrate, respondents placed Ben and Joey into the expected social classes in the MTURK survey. With the MTURK study's information, a few different rationalizations can be made about the perceived social class discrepancies. Firstly, the class-specific language may not have matched the intended social class, rooting the employees in a lower social stratum for participants. Class-specific language may have been unintentionally focused towards students at the University of Arkansas and caused perceptions to change undesirably. Secondly, because the employees were performing unethical behavior over the course of the study, when participants were asked to identify Ben and Joey's social class, they may have perceived them to be of lower social standing to correlate with their poor behavior. This would theoretically mean participants may have ranked Ben and Joey similar to those in the MTURK study if they were polled prior to the unethical behavior scenarios. Thirdly, University of Arkansas students have a different perception of social class than those nationally. Because the locations of the samples of the two studies are so different, it is difficult to perfectly compare the two studies' results. The second conclusion towards the shortcomings of this study has

interesting implications for future research if true. It could show that prejudices unintentionally accrue to an individual if they are repeatedly scrutinized as a bad actor.

Improvements and Future Research

To improve this study, the sample should be larger and more closely represent those in the labor force because the workplace was the focal point of the study. The perceptions of business leaders and employees are the most relevant to the study's results and conclusions. Additionally, social class images need to be more distinct and numerous to differentiate participant's potential ingroups. Further research should be performed on social class-specific language to describe behavior because distinguishing class language was largely created without empirical backing. All these elements would marginally improve the findings of this study if implemented.

Potential avenues for related future research would be a similar survey but with unethical behaviors with victims, with both the perpetrator and victim portrayed as a certain social class. This study could test whether a participant's own social class is more closely tied with victims or perpetrators of the same social class. Would participants want to more harshly punish perpetrators that attack a member of their own social class or give more leniency towards perpetrators of the same social class? Also, a study should be performed with second-party adjudicators – someone who is being directly impacted by the transgression to gauge their biases. Ingroup biases illustrate that instead of third-party leniency, adjudication could have second-party scrutiny for those ingroup perpetrators. Lastly, a study should be done to test whether the unethical behavior of an individual can actually change people's perception of that individual's social class. This study may have shown some evidence of this phenomenon and warrants further explanation.

Conclusion

This study sought to measure the effect of social class on a third-party's perception of ethicality and assignment of punishment for unethical behavior in a workplace. In legal proceedings, lower class defendants face harsher sentences, and this study attempted to mirror those findings in the business setting. Additionally, social class ingroup biasing was measured, theorizing that similar social class participants and perpetrators would result in less punitive measures suggested. After conductance, it was shown there was no significant differences in third-party assessments of wrongdoing and assignment of punishment between employees of differing social strata, nor did it show that people are lenient on members of their own social class for unethical behavior. However, experimental limitations may point to why differences were not statistically significant and certainly warrants further testing.

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Appendix

Survey 1 Social Class Measures

1. The following question asks about your standing in society. Think of the **ladder below** as representing where people stand in our society. At the top of the ladder are the people who are best off, those who have the most money, most education, and best jobs. At the bottom are the people who are worst off, those who have the least money, least education, and worst jobs or no job.

Select the rung that best describes where **you currently stand** on the ladder. Please select only one.

Participants were presented with a vertical ladder with ten rungs to click on.

2. The following is similar to the previous question, but asks about your standing in society **during your childhood** rather than your current standing

The following question asks about your standing in society. Think of the ladder as representing where people stand in our society. At the top of the ladder are the people who are best off, those who have the most money, most education, and best jobs. At the bottom are the people who are worst off, those who have the least money, least education, and worst jobs or no job.

Select the rung that best describes **where your family stood on the ladder during your childhood**. Please select only one.

Participants were presented with a vertical ladder with ten rungs to click on.

3. What is your current social class status?

1. Lower
2. Lower-Middle
3. Middle
4. Upper-Middle
5. Upper

4. What was your social class status during childhood?

1. Lower
2. Lower-Middle
3. Middle
4. Upper-Middle
5. Upper

Vignette 1

Upper SC: While at work, you overhear an employee, Benjamin Cabot, making long calls that are clearly not work related. He appears to be making calls to local **classical** music radio stations to enter contests for cash prizes, affecting his daily productivity. You expect this behavior to fade after a couple days, but your coworker continues to make unrelated calls for the next two weeks.

Lower SC: While at work, you overhear an employee, Joey Clark, making long calls that are clearly not work related. He appears to be making calls to local **country** radio stations to enter contests for cash prizes, affecting his daily productivity. You expect this behavior to fade after a couple days, but your coworker continues to make unrelated calls for the next two weeks.

Vignette 2

Upper SC: While at an employee, Benjamin Cabot's, desk you notice several piles of supply items from the office including boxes of pencils, glue, and tape in his **briefcase**. When you ask him about this, he says he is using the supplies for an art project unrelated to his work.

Lower SC: While at an employee, Joey Clark's, desk you notice several piles of supply items from the office including boxes of pencils, glue, and tape in his **backpack**. When you ask him about this, he says he is using the supplies for a home project unrelated to his work.

Vignette 3

Upper SC: Your employee Benjamin Cabot **travels frequently to visit with existing and potential clients**. Benjamin must submit itemized receipts to be approved by the company for reimbursement as well as report the amount he wants reimbursed. Benjamin has been traveling for the company for a couple years now and has been seen to be trustworthy in his traveling expenditures. Those approving his reimbursement no longer look with scrutiny at his itemized receipts. You've noticed Benjamin begins to report that he should be reimbursed at least 10% more than what he spent on his travels.

Lower SC: Your employee Joey Clark **travels frequently to make deliveries**. Joey must submit itemized receipts to be approved by the company for reimbursement as well as report the amount he wants reimbursed. Joey has been traveling for the company for a couple years now and has been seen to be trustworthy in his traveling expenditures. Those approving his reimbursement no longer look with scrutiny at his itemized receipts. You've noticed Joey begins to report that he should be reimbursed at least 10% more than what he spent on his travels.

Vignette 4

Upper SC: At your workplace, the refrigerator is routinely stocked with waters, juices, and snacks for your employees' consumption and enjoyment during the work day. Last Friday, you saw Benjamin Cabot filling up his **yeti cooler** with the drinks and snacks on his way out for the weekend.

Lower SC: At your workplace, the refrigerator is routinely stocked with waters, juices, and snacks for your employees' consumption and enjoyment during the work day. Last Friday, you saw Joey Clark filling up a **Walmart plastic bag** with the drinks and snacks on his way out for the weekend.

Ethical & Punishment Assessment

1. How would you rate [employee] behavior in this situation?
 1. Extremely unethical
 2. Moderately unethical
 3. Slightly unethical
 4. Neither ethical nor unethical
 5. Slightly ethical
 6. Moderately ethical
 7. Extremely ethical
2. If you were [employee] manager, how severe would this punishment be?
 1. No punishment
 2. Not at all severe
 3. Slightly severe
 4. Moderately severe
 5. Extremely severe
3. In a few sentences, tell us in detail how you would respond to this employee's behavior if you were their manager.

Social Class Determination

1. If you had to speculate, what do you think [employee] social class is?
 1. Lower social class
 2. Lower-middle social class
 3. Middle social class
 4. Upper-middle social class
 5. Upper social class

Upper/Lower Class Employee Identities (Respectively)

