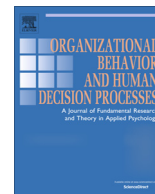




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# Blame the shepherd not the sheep: Imitating higher-ranking transgressors mitigates punishment for unethical behavior



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## ABSTRACT

Do bad role models exonerate others' unethical behavior? Based on social learning theory and psychological theories of blame, we predicted that unethical behavior by higher-ranking individuals changes how people respond to lower-ranking individuals who subsequently commit the same transgression. Five studies explored when and why this rank-dependent imitation effect occurs. Across all five studies, we found that people were less punitive when low-ranking transgressors imitated high-ranking members of their organization. However, imitation only reduced punishment when the two transgressors were from the same organization (Study 2), when the transgressions were highly similar (Study 3), and when it was unclear whether the initial transgressor was punished (Study 5). Results also indicated that imitation affects punishment because it influences whom people blame for the transgression. These findings reveal actor-observer differences in social learning and identify a way that unethical behavior spreads through organizations.

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## 1. Introduction

Major scandals caused by corporate executives receive a great deal of attention from the media and scholars alike, but the aggregated cost of relatively minor transgressions committed by the average employee is substantial. Asset misappropriations, such as expense report manipulation and inventory theft, are by far the most common type of fraud within organizations (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, 2014). Expense report fraud alone costs companies in the United States \$1 billion annually (J.P. Morgan Chase, 2011). Employee theft of retail goods causes \$15.1 billion in lost revenue, which is a larger loss than is caused by shoplifting (National Retail Federation, 2012). Tips from employees remain the most effective means of detecting these types of fraud (Association of Fraud Examiners, 2014; see also Weaver, Treviño, & Cochran, 1999). However, employees also can create and maintain a culture that “normalizes” bad behavior. For example, it is an open secret in some organizations that employees pad their expense reports by ten percent or more (Strout, 2001). Currently, it is poorly understood how

people come to tolerate unethical behavior in some instances more than in others. What increases the likelihood that people will look the other way rather than punish those who violate the rules?

Behavioral ethics research has tended to examine ethical transgressions as isolated, one-off occurrences, rather than in relation to other transgressions that have occurred within the organization (Ashforth, Gioia, Robinson, & Treviño, 2008; Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010; Moore, 2009). Recent work, however, has begun to focus on how bad behavior propagates through organizations by exploring social contagion as a contributor to abusive supervision (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012), anti-social employee behavior (Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2010; Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998), levels of deviance across workgroups (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009), collective acts of corruption that benefit the organization (Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014), as well as exemplary behaviors (Brown et al., 2005; Mayer, Nurmohamed, Treviño, Shapiro, & Schminke, 2013; Schaubroeck et al., 2012). Placing greater emphasis on understanding the connections among unethical behaviors enacted by different people within organizations as they unfold over time has identified important processes that are often underspecified in models of individual ethical decision making.

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In the spirit of this emerging area of research, we examine how prior instances of unethical behavior change how people evaluate subsequent transgressions and punish imitators. Our contention is that people are less apt to punish bad behavior when transgressors imitate those who outrank them compared to when they imitate peers or commit a transgression no one else committed recently. That is, we expect there to be a rank-dependent imitation effect on punishment. As we explain below, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998) and theories of blame (Malle, Guglielmo, & Moore, 2014) suggest that a rank-dependent imitation effect should emerge because bad behavior by high-ranking others affects how observers assign blame, which in turn affects punishment. Moreover, psychological research on descriptive norms suggests that high-ranking individuals' behavior can alter observers' perceptions of what is typical for group members (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), which also may mitigate punishment. In sum, we expect that bad role models at least partially exonerate others' subsequent transgressions of the same kind in the eyes of observers.

Our research contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it contributes to the literature on retributive justice by examining whether people become more tolerant of bad behavior after it has been modeled by higher-ranking members of organizations. Prior research has largely focused on relatively stable characteristics of punishers, transgressors, and contexts (e.g., Arvey & Jones, 1985; Butterfield, Treviño, & Ball, 1996; Podsakoff, 1982). Our research is the first to consider more transient features of situations (e.g., recent misconduct) as a unique influence on culpability and punishment. As in prior research on retributive justice (e.g., Darley & Pittman, 2003; Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2014), we focus on lay observers' reactions to transgressions. Although leaders and supervisors have the formal authority and responsibility to punish undesirable behavior, employees often scold, sabotage, or ostracize their coworkers for misbehaving (e.g., Barker, 1993; Gromet & Okimoto, 2014; Hollinger & Clark, 1982; O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Struthers, Miller, Boudens, & Briggs, 2001), and this type of punishment from peers is a very effective deterrent of unethical behavior (e.g., Hollinger & Clark, 1982; Tittle, 1977; Tittle & Logan, 1973; Zimring & Hawkins, 1973).

Second, our research extends recent work in behavioral ethics that has begun to address how prior behaviors affect subsequent behaviors across levels of the organization. Our focus is novel because most other work in this area examines people's propensity to commit unethical behavior, whereas we investigate when and how prior transgressions change people's evaluations and responses to others' unethical behavior. Therefore, we offer a new and complementary perspective on unethical contagion within organizations because we directly examine how prior transgressions—especially those committed by higher-ranking members of organizations—change the environment in which subsequent transgressions occur. If, as we suggest, people are less apt to punish those who imitate unethical behavior committed by higher-ranking members of their organization, then social systems may become less responsive to certain transgressions over time, which may disinhibit others from acting similarly. This dynamic represents one mechanism through which unethical behavior may become prevalent in organizations.

Third, it is well-established that modeling influences others' propensity to act similarly (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998), but very little is known about whether, when, and why third-party observers take bad role models into account when evaluating and responding to others' behavior. That is, we investigate whether people take modeling and social learning processes into account when evaluating individuals who followed a bad role model (i.e., third-party

judgments) rather than examine how modeling and social learning influences individuals contemplating an action (i.e., second-party judgment and behavior). Thus, the current research has implications for social learning theory as well.

## 2. Theoretical background

Recent work on ethical leadership and contagion focuses on sequences of unethical behaviors in organizations and has sought to understand how one individual's behavioral output becomes an input to other individuals' judgments and behaviors (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2009; Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014). This work builds on insights from social learning theory, which emphasizes that people learn how to behave in a given situation by observing others (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Leaders who model bad behavior embolden their subordinates to engage in bad behavior (Brown et al., 2005; Mawritz et al., 2012; Mayer et al., 2009, 2010). Modeling can also exert an influence up or across the organizational hierarchy as well (e.g., Gino et al., 2009; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998; Zey-Ferrell & Ferrell, 1982). In sum, research that draws from social learning theory has begun to articulate processes that explain how unethical behavior within organizations unfolds over time.

Although modeling and social learning processes are well established as antecedents of behavior, research has not considered whether third-party observers take bad role models into account when evaluating and responding to transgressions. In the sections that follow, we discuss when and why we expect people to punish misbehavior differently depending on whether a higher-ranking member of the organization has recently committed a similar transgression. We argue that unethical behavior from higher-ranking individuals—but not peers—influences perceived descriptive norms for behavior, alters attributions of blame, and reduces punishment.

### 2.1. Punishment

Punishment is the administration of an aversive response or the removal of a desired response following an undesirable behavior (Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980; Butterfield et al., 1996; Treviño, 1992). Authorities use punishment to change the behavior of transgressors, but they also hope to inhibit undesirable behavior from others (Arvey & Jones, 1985; Nagin, 1998; Treviño, 1992). Because people consider the potential for punishment when making ethical decisions (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990), the absence of punishment can promote deviance and corruption (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Litzky, Eddleston, & Kidder, 2006).

Behavioral ethics research often assumes that punishment is a constant feature of the situation, barring changes to the formal rules of the organization (cf. Fragale et al., 2009). In practice, however, managers have considerable discretion when deciding how to interpret and enforce formal rules (Butterfield et al., 1996; Mooijman, van Dijk, Ellemers, & van Dijk, 2015; Podsakoff, 1982). Moreover, the most effective punishment often comes from third-party observers, such as peers, rather than leaders (e.g., Hollinger & Clark, 1982; Tittle, 1977; Tittle & Logan, 1973; Zimring & Hawkins, 1973). Employees without formal authority can punish their coworkers (or even their supervisors) by scolding, sabotaging, or ostracizing transgressors (e.g., Barker, 1993; Hollinger & Clark, 1982; O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Struthers et al., 2001), and standards for these informal forms of punishment rarely exist. In sum, punishment is a common part of social and organizational life for many people, irrespective of their formal responsibilities (Treviño, 1992), and two people who commit the same transgression may receive different amounts of punishment.

Research traditionally focuses on stable characteristics of people and situations as key antecedents of punishment, perhaps because the goal of much of this work is to understand how punishment relates to sustained work behaviors (e.g., effort and performance; Arvey & Jones, 1985; Podsakoff, 1982). Much less research considers more transient influences that are common in situations when transgressions occur, such as whether others in the organization committed similar transgressions. We expect that transgressors are punished less when they imitate someone who outranks them compared to when they imitate peers or commit a transgression that no one else committed recently. In the following sections, we discuss two complementary mechanisms that may contribute to this rank-dependent imitation effect: attributions of blame and descriptive norms.

## 2.2. Attributions of blame

Although people use punishment to reduce undesirable behavior, not all undesirable behavior warrants punishment. To determine the appropriate level of punishment for an offense, people evaluate the extent to which the actor deserves blame (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Malle et al., 2014; O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995). Blame is a negative evaluation of an actor based on a judgment that the actor intentionally engaged in unwarranted, norm-incongruent, negative behavior (Malle et al., 2014). To assign blame, people perform a complex set of appraisals that consider whether the actor intentionally caused the event (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Fragale et al., 2009; Malle & Knobe, 1997; Shaver, 1985; Sloman, Fernbach, & Ewing, 2009) and whether there are mitigating circumstances or reasons that may justify the action (e.g., Malle, 2004; Riordan, Marlin, & Kellogg, 1983; Scanlon, 2008).<sup>1</sup> In sum, blame is a judgment about an actor rather than an evaluation of a behavior or an outcome, and observers may disapprove of an action, independent of whether they also condemn the actor.

Imitation may directly influence how much people blame transgressors. People generally assume that subordinates have less causal agency in their organization's activities and therefore are more willing to attribute the successes and failures of organizations to higher- than lower-ranking members (Hamilton, 1978; Hamilton & Sanders, 1981; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Zemba, Young, & Morris, 2006). Also, people expect higher-ranking individuals to bear more responsibility (Bell & Tetlock, 1989; Sanders et al., 1996; Treviño, 1992; Weiner, 1995; see also Bandura, 1999; Milgram, 1974) and lower-ranking individuals to conform to examples set by higher-ranking authorities (Overbeck, Tiedens, & Brion, 2006). Compared to higher-ranking individuals, people perceive lower-ranking individuals' behavior as less intentional (Fragale et al., 2009), more confined by organizational scripts (Gioia, 1992; Gioia & Poole, 1984), and governed more by situational than dispositional influences (Overbeck et al., 2006). In sum, people tend to attribute less intentionality and responsibility to low- than high-ranking individuals, which in turn should reduce blame and punishment for low-ranking transgressors.

Although prior work finds that people's attributions for a behavior differ depending on the actor's rank, we are aware of no research that considers imitation in conjunction with rank. We expect that the behaviors of high-ranking role models activate lay theories of intentionality and responsibility for lower-ranking members of a hierarchy, which in turn attenuate how much blame people attribute to imitators. In other words, imitation makes sali-

ent social influences on behavior, especially when the first actor outranks the imitator. As a result, people are less inclined to punish transgressors who imitate those who outrank them compared to when they imitate peers or commit a transgression no one else committed recently.

## 2.3. Descriptive norms and norm focus

The rank-dependent imitation effect may also depend in part on observers' understanding of what is typical behavior in a given situation. People compare behavior with norms to identify whether or to what degree a violation has occurred (Malle et al., 2014; Treviño, 1992). The focus theory of normative conduct indicates that two different types of norms can be salient in a given situation (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Cialdini et al., 1990). Injunctive norms reflect beliefs about how people *ought* to behave. Descriptive norms, in contrast, reflect beliefs about how most people in a group *actually* behave. Given that injunctions are the core of deontological theories of normative ethics (Kagan, 1998; Kamm, 2007), one might expect injunctive norms to dominate people's evaluations of ethical behavior. However, descriptive norms can have a powerful influence on the perceived permissibility of unethical behavior when they are salient (Cialdini et al., 1990; Gino et al., 2009; Mayer et al., 2013; see also Moore & Gino, 2013). For example, padding an expense report may seem more permissible when evaluated against descriptive norms (e.g., "many people in the company pad their expense reports") rather than against injunctive norms (e.g., "company rules mandate accurate statements of expenses").

In the case of imitation, the relative rank of the two actors (i.e., the initial transgressor and the imitator) may be especially important to the salience and the content of descriptive norms for two reasons.<sup>2</sup> First, people pay more attention to those in high- than low-ranking positions (Fiske, Morling, & Stevens, 1996; Flynn & Amanatullah, 2012; Giordano, 1983; Goode, 1978; Mawritz et al., 2012; Ridgeway & Correll, 2006), which makes high-ranking individuals' behavior a salient signal of descriptive norms. Second, high rank is an explicit indication of the organization's approval and acceptance of an individual, which contributes to the individual's perceived credibility as a role model (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2009). Together, these two features of rank indicate that the behavior of high- rather than low-ranking members of an organization are more likely to influence perceived descriptive norms, which in turn can serve as the point of comparison people use to assess subsequent transgressions.

Descriptive norms may contribute to the rank-dependent imitation effect by acting either in parallel (i.e., independent, single-stage mediation) or sequentially (i.e., two-stage mediation) with attributions of blame. Specifically, descriptive norms may independently mediate the rank-dependent imitation effect because people generally believe that punishment should be proportional to the degree of the violation (Treviño, 1992). Therefore, if the initial transgressor's behavior changes perceived descriptive norms, it would reduce the discrepancy between norms and the imitator's behavior, and people should, in turn, recommend less punishment for the imitator.

Alternatively or additionally (these two paths need not be mutually exclusive), descriptive norms may operate sequentially with attributions of blame and affect the rank-dependent imitation effect. Behavior that diverges from relevant norms is perceived negatively, and this perception initiates a search to understand its cause, including the extent to which someone is to blame

<sup>1</sup> Malle et al. (2014) argue that their conceptualization of blame subsumes and extends prior work on responsibility (e.g., Jones, 1991; Treviño, 1992; Weiner, 1995). They avoid the term "responsibility" because they believe its usage in the literature is varied and at times imprecise.

<sup>2</sup> Although sociological research views norms as collective-level constructs that are stable over time, psychological research suggests that individuals' sense of what is normative may diverge from others' views and from an objectively measurable collective-level assessment (see Tost, 2011 for a detailed discussion of this issue).

(Malle & Knobe, 1997; Wong & Weiner, 1981). Moreover, the magnitude of the divergence between the behavior and the norm affects how people assign blame; people are more inclined to blame someone when the divergence is greater (e.g., Alicke, 2000; Alicke & Davis, 1989; Baron & Hershey, 1988). Therefore, if the initial transgressor's behavior changes perceived descriptive norms and reduces the discrepancy between norms and the imitator's behavior, then people should be less motivated to assign blame for the transgression, which in turn should lead to lower levels of blame and, ultimately, less punishment.

In summary, we suggest that imitating higher-ranking members of an organization influences punishment because it affects attributions of blame and descriptive norms, and these mediating processes may operate in parallel, in a sequence, or both. That is, attributions of blame may depend, at least in part, on the extent to which an initial transgressor's behavior influences perceived descriptive norms. In other words, holding features of the transgression itself constant, low-ranking imitators are likely to receive less punishment when they imitate higher-ranking members of their organization compared to when they imitate peers or commit a transgression no one else committed recently. Moreover, this rank-dependent imitation effect on punishment should be mediated by attributions of blame, perceived descriptive norms, or both. Stated formally:

**Hypothesis 1a.** For an identical transgression, observers recommend less severe punishment for people who imitate those who outrank them in their organization compared to people who commit a transgression no one else committed recently.

**Hypothesis 1b.** For an identical transgression, observers recommend less severe punishment for people who imitate those who outrank them than for people of the same rank who imitate their peers.

**Hypothesis 2a.** The relationship between imitation and punishment is mediated by attributions of blame.

**Hypothesis 2b.** The relationship between imitation and punishment is mediated by perceived descriptive norms.

**Hypothesis 2c.** The relationship between imitation and punishment is sequentially mediated by both perceived descriptive norms and attributions of blame.

### 3. Study 1

Study 1 examined punishment as a function of whether a transgressor imitated another person who had previously committed the same transgression and whether the other person was higher-ranked or the same rank as the focal transgressor. Participants read that researchers were crowdsourcing the review of a large number of video recordings from another study. The rank of the two people in the video and whether the people in the video broke the rules and stole money varied across experimental conditions. After reviewing the video, participants had an opportunity to punish the focal transgressor if they felt his behavior warranted it.

#### 3.1. Participants

Amazon Mechanical Turk Workers ( $N = 200$ ) earned \$2.00 to complete the study. All were residents of the United States. We excluded data from 21 respondents who failed one or both of the

following attention checks: (1) Three participants failed to solve a puzzle matrix from the task the people in the video completed; they searched for two of 12 numbers in a grid that summed to 10. Therefore, success depended more on motivation (i.e., willingness to search) than ability (i.e., basic arithmetic); (2) Fourteen participants failed to successfully complete an item embedded in the measures that stated, "To indicate you are reading carefully, please mark slightly agree." Four participants failed both. The resultant sample ( $N = 179$ ) was 38% female and ranged in age from 18 to 69 ( $M = 35.38$ ,  $SD = 10.71$ ); 74.9% identified as White, 10.6% as African American or Black, 8.4% as Asian, 6.7% as Hispanic or Latino/Latina, and 2.8% as Native American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander. Nearly all had more than one year of full-time work experience (91.0%), including 47.8% who had more than 11 years of experience.

#### 3.2. Design and procedure

Participants read that researchers were crowdsourcing the review of a large number of video recordings from another study. Ostensibly, the researchers conducted the study in many rooms simultaneously and were unable supervise all of them. Therefore, the sessions were video-recorded, and the researchers were now seeking to identify any irregular behavior. Participants read that the people in the video were students who had worked closely together on a team during orientation week before the fall academic term began. In reality, the people in the videos were two paid actors who appeared in all of the videos and sat in the same position across experimental conditions. In the videos, the actors were asked to solve a series of math matrices (see Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). Participants solved a sample matrix before watching the video to familiarize them with the task and how much time and effort it required (see Supplemental information for details).

The video shot from a single perspective from a camera mounted on the wall of the room. The instructions told participants to evaluate the person on the right side of the screen and explained that another participant would watch the video and evaluate the person on the left. At the beginning of each video, an experimenter who remained out of view ushered two people into a room and asked them to seat themselves at a table in the middle of the frame. The experimenter described the matrix task and explained that pay was based on performance; participants were to pay themselves \$0.50 for each matrix they solved correctly during a four minute work period. Each person was given an envelope that contained nine \$1 bills and four quarters (i.e., \$10, or enough to pay someone who solved all 20 matrices correctly). After watching the video, participants completed a survey that included the dependent measure, manipulation checks, and demographic items. All measures included in the study are reported below.

##### 3.2.1. Rank manipulation

To manipulate rank, the description of the person on the left of the screen and the way the actor was dressed varied across conditions. In the higher rank condition, the person on the left wore a suit, and the description indicated that he was a senior student in the final year of the program who was selected as a team leader because he was highly regarded and admired by his classmates. The person on the right was described as a team member who was beginning the first year of the program. In the same rank condition, both people in the video wore a t-shirt and jeans, and both were described as team members who were beginning the program; there was no mention of a team leader.

##### 3.2.2. Imitation manipulation

The actor on the right always took all of the money without solving any matrices, but the behavior of the actor on the left var-

ied across conditions. In the imitation condition, the actor on the left put down his pen a short time after the experimenter left the room, inverted the envelope of money to empty its contents, and left the room. The actor on the right watched the person on the left and then did the same a short time later. In the no imitation condition, the actor on the left work on solving matrices for the duration of the video. A short time after the experimenter left the room, the actor on the right removed all \$10 from the envelope and left the room without solving a single matrix.

### 3.2.3. Punishment

The instructions explained that "...participants sometimes do things that are undesirable when a supervisor is not in the room. When that happens, we enforce the rules by preventing participants from signing up for future studies for a period of time. For example, participants are not allowed to eat, drink, or talk on the phone while they are supposed to be working on a task. If participants violate these rules, we usually ban them from future studies for one month. Of course, more serious violations would necessitate longer bans." Participants could punish the actor on the right by indicating how many months, if any, he should be banned from future studies. Responses were permitted to range from 0 to 12 months ( $M = 8.52$ ,  $SD = 4.67$ ).

## 3.3. Results

### 3.3.1. Manipulation check

Three items indicated that the rank manipulation was successful. Specifically, participants compared two people in the video in terms of rank, status, and seniority using 7-point bipolar scales with higher scores indicating higher rank for the person on the left ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ). A 2 (Other Actor Rank: higher rank, same rank)  $\times$  2 (Imitation: imitation, no imitation) ANOVA found a main effect of other actor rank. The other actor was higher ranking in the higher rank ( $M = 5.90$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) than same rank conditions ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ),  $F(1,178) = 113.56$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.40$ . The main effect of the imitation,  $F(1,178) = 1.87$ ,  $p = 0.17$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ , and the interaction were not significant,  $F(1,178) = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.78$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ .

### 3.3.2. Punishment

A 2 (Other Actor Rank: higher rank, same rank)  $\times$  2 (Imitation: imitation, no imitation) ANOVA indicated that the main effect of rank on punishment was marginally significant,  $F(1,175) = 3.53$ ,  $p = 0.06$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ . Participants punished the focal actor slightly less severely when the other actor was higher ranking ( $M = 7.86$ ,  $SD = 4.95$ ) rather than the same rank ( $M = 9.13$ ,  $SD = 4.33$ ). The main effect of imitation was significant,  $F(1,175) = 12.85$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$ . Participants punished the focal actor less severely when he imitated the behavior of the other ( $M = 7.30$ ,  $SD = 4.97$ ) compared to when he was the only one to steal money ( $M = 9.68$ ,  $SD = 4.07$ ). However, the interaction of rank and imitation was significant,  $F(1,175) = 4.60$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$  (see Fig. 1).

Planned comparisons tested Hypotheses 1a and 1b. In support of Hypothesis 1a, participants punished the focal actor less severely when he imitated a higher-ranking actor compared to when he was the only one to steal money,  $F(1,175) = 16.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$ , but punishment for the focal actor was the same when he imitated a peer or was the only one to steal money,  $F(1,175) = 1.05$ ,  $p = 0.31$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ . In support of Hypothesis 1b, punishment for the focal actor was less severe when he imitated someone higher-ranking rather than a peer,  $F(1,175) = 7.97$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ .

## 3.4. Discussion

Study 1 indicated punishment depended on imitation and the relative rank of those involved. For the same transgression, punishment was less severe for the focal actor when he imitated a transgression committed by someone higher-ranking than when he imitated a peer or did not imitate anyone. In other words, it appears that people take imitation into account when levying punishment, depending on the relative rank of those involved.

## 4. Study 2

One limitation of Study 1 is that we manipulated rank by varying the non-focal actor's role and title (team leader or team member), attire (formal or casual), and year in the program (senior

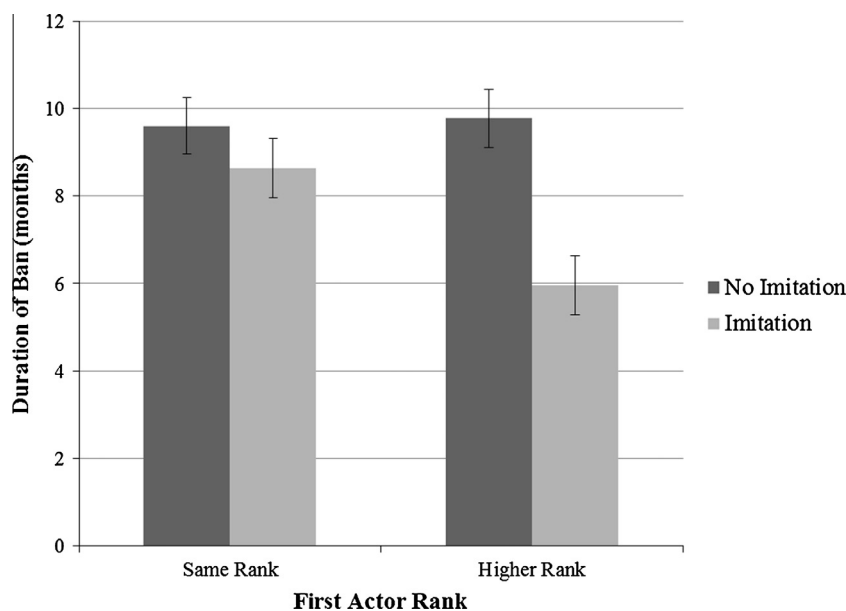


Fig. 1. The effects of first actor rank and imitation on punishment in Study 1.

student in the final year of the program or new student beginning the first year of the program). Therefore, rank is one likely explanation for the effects we observed, but other factors correlated with rank, such as perceived age or tenure in organization, may have contributed to the effects. Study 2 sought to replicate the results of Study 1 in a new context and rule out alternative explanations for the observed effects by manipulating rank solely by varying job title.

Study 2 also began to explore the boundary conditions and mechanisms responsible for the rank-dependent imitation effect. Researchers often investigate mechanisms by measuring the proposed intervening variables and testing statistical mediation, but experiments that manipulate the proposed mechanism also can provide evidence of mechanisms (Sigall & Mills, 1998; Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). We argue that the rank-dependent imitation effect on punishment arises because the first actor's behavior is either seen as a mitigating circumstance that reduces blame for the imitator or makes the behavior seem more normal (or both). These mechanisms should only engage when transgressors are members of the same organization. The first actor's behavior should only operate as a plausible reason or excuse that mitigates blame for the second actor when the two actors are linked by organizational membership; reasons and justifications for a particular behavior can mitigate blame (Malle, 2004; Riordan et al., 1983; Scanlon, 2008), but in the case of a transgression in the workplace, it is likely that observers would believe that following a supervisor's lead is a better justification than following the lead of someone unaffiliated with the organization. Likewise, the first actor's behavior only should affect the descriptive norms that apply to the second actor when the two actors are members of the same organization. In short, group membership of the two actors should moderate the rank-dependent imitation effect.

Study 2 manipulated first actor rank and whether the two actors belonged to the same organization to create a 2 (First Actor Rank: higher rank, same rank)  $\times$  2 (Organizational Membership: same, different) between-subjects design. We expected observers to punish the imitator less severely when he imitated a higher-rank rather than same-ranked person from the same company, but punishment would be high, irrespective of rank, when the instigator was from a different company. In other words, we expected that the rank-dependent imitation effect would be attenuated when the two actors belonged to different organizations.

#### 4.1. Participants

Two hundred Amazon Mechanical Turk Workers earned \$1.00 to complete the study. All were residents of the United States. We excluded data from 44 respondents who failed one or more of three attention checks: (1) "To indicate you are reading carefully, please mark slightly agree." (2) "Were the two people from the same or a different company?" Response options were "Same Company," or "Different Company," (3) Participants who spent less than six seconds on the page that presented the scenario (i.e., we excluded people who spent less than 1/10th of the average time; Mean = 60.5 s; Median = 54.0 s). The resultant sample ( $N = 156$ ) was 36% female, and ranged in age from 18 to 64 ( $M = 32.72$ ,  $SD = 11.00$ ).

#### 4.2. Design and procedure

The experiment was a 2 (First Actor Rank: higher rank, same rank)  $\times$  2 (Organizational Membership: same, different) between-subjects design. Participants read about an event that ostensibly occurred in a midsized, financial services company located in the United States. A vignette explained that the company issued credit cards to employees for business-related expenses. Employees are

required to complete and sign an expense report that affirms that charges to the card are for legitimate business purposes. The vignette then described a recent incident when a junior analyst witnessed another person charge over \$3100 to a company credit card for a lavish dinner, expensive wine, and special tickets to a sold out show. The vignette explicitly stated that these expenses were for personal entertainment for the employee and his friends and did not relate to clients or business in any way. The junior analyst then heard from another employee at the company that the person claimed on his expense report that the \$3100 in charges were for entertaining clients. The junior analyst then imitated the behavior by charging over \$3100 to the card for personal meals and entertainment and claiming that the charges were for entertaining clients. All measures included in the study are reported below.

##### 4.2.1. First actor rank manipulation

The rank of the first actor in the vignette varied across conditions. Participants in the higher rank condition read that the first actor was a Vice President. Participants in the same rank condition read that the first actor was another junior analyst.

##### 4.2.2. Organizational membership manipulation

The actors' employers also varied across experimental conditions. Participants in the same company condition read that the first and second actors worked for the same company. Participants in the different company condition read that the first and second actors worked for different companies.

##### 4.2.3. Punishment severity

Three items assessed punishment severity: (1) How severely should [target] be punished (1 = *not severe at all*, 7 = *very severe*); (2) How strong should the punishment for [target] be (1 = *not strong at all*, 7 = *very strong*); (3) How harsh should the punishment for [target] be (1 = *not harsh at all*, 7 = *very harsh*). The first item was a single-item measure of punishment in previous research (Wiltermuth & Flynn, 2013), and we developed the second and third items based on the first one. The items were averaged for analysis ( $\alpha = 0.98$ ).

#### 4.3. Results

##### 4.3.1. Manipulation check

Four items at the end of the study indicated that the rank manipulation was successful. Participants rated "How prestigious..." and "How high in status is the job of junior analyst" ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and "How prestigious..." and "How high in status is the job of Vice President" ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ) using 7-point scales that ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*. A repeated measures ANOVA found that Vice President ( $M = 6.39$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) was perceived as higher rank than junior analyst ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ),  $F(1, 155) = 935.90$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.86$ .

##### 4.3.2. Punishment

A 2 (First Actor Rank: higher rank, same rank)  $\times$  2 (Organization Membership: same, different) ANOVA with punishment severity as the dependent variable indicated that the main effect for first actor rank was not significant,  $F(1, 152) = 0.21$ ,  $p = 0.65$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ . The main effect for organization membership was significant,  $F(1, 152) = 6.05$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ . Punishment was less severe when the second actor imitated someone from the same ( $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ) rather than a different company ( $M = 5.89$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). However, the interaction of first actor rank and organizational membership was significant,  $F(1, 152) = 5.30$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ . Analyses of simple effects investigated the effect of first actor rank at each level of organization membership (see Fig. 2). When the two actors were

from the same company, punishment was less severe when the first actor was higher-ranked rather than a peer,  $F(1, 152) = 4.24$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ . When the two actors were from different companies, punishment severity was the same, regardless of first actor rank,  $F(1, 152) = 1.54$ ,  $p = 0.22$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ . In short, the results of Study 2 support Hypothesis 1b and also provide initial support for Hypotheses 2a and 2b; imitation reduced punishment, but only when the actors were from the same company.

#### 4.4. Discussion

Study 2 provided additional evidence for the rank-dependent imitation effect using a different method and a different measure of punishment. Specifically, people punished imitators less severely when they imitated a higher-ranking member of their organization compared to when they imitated a peer. However, punishment did not differ as a function of the rank of those involved when the two people were members of different organizations. Given that out-group members should not influence attributions of blame or perceptions of descriptive norms, the results provide initial evidence that attributions of blame and descriptive norms may play a role in the rank-dependent imitation effect.

### 5. Study 3

Study 3 investigated the mechanisms that underpin the rank-dependent imitation effect by measuring blame and descriptive norms including statistical tests of mediation. Study 3 also tested if the effect we have labeled “imitation” necessarily involves imitation or whether any prior transgression committed by a higher-ranking member of the organization might attenuate punishment. Imitation, by definition, is the replication of one person’s behavior by another, and replication connotes a high degree of similarity between the behaviors. However, any prior transgression, regardless of similarity, may influence people’s reactions to subsequent transgressions from the perspective of research on ethical climate, which refers to individuals’ holistic impressions of the (un)ethical conduct within a unit or organization (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Therefore, it is important to test whether imitation is a distinct from ethical climate.

Studies 1 and 2 explored the rank-dependent imitation effect as a function of the relation between the actors. Study 3, in contrast, examined the rank-dependent imitation effect as a function of the relation between the two actors’ behaviors. Specifically, Study 3 manipulated the degree of similarity between the bad behaviors committed by two people in an organization and tested whether behavioral similarity affected punishment. Because Study 3 examined two behaviors and used a fully crossed design, Study 3 also tested the rank-dependent imitation effect in a new context and sought additional evidence of the robustness of the effect across behaviors.

#### 5.1. Participants

Two hundred Amazon Mechanical Turk Workers earned \$2.00 to complete the study. All were residents of the United States. We excluded data from 45 respondents who failed one or more of three attention checks: (1) “To indicate you are reading carefully, please mark slightly agree.” (2) “According to what you read, what did the [focal target] do?” Response options were “Used the company credit card to pay for personal entertainment,” “Took home company electronics equipment to for home entertainment,” or “Created false client referrals for personal gain.” (3) Participants who spent less than six seconds on the page that presented the scenario (i.e., we excluded people who spent less than 1/10th of the

average time; *Mean* = 63.1 s; *Median* = 55.7 s). The resultant sample ( $N = 155$ ) was 41% female, ranged in age from 18 to 67 ( $M = 32.78$ ,  $SD = 9.72$ ), and averaged 12.09 years ( $SD = 9.06$ ) of work experience.

#### 5.2. Design and procedure

The experiment was a 2 (First Actor Transgression: expense report, electronics equipment)  $\times$  2 (Second Actor Transgression: expense report, electronics equipment) between-subjects design. The scenario was similar to the one used in Study 2, but participants read about two transgressions. The first transgression always was committed by a Vice President, and the second transgression always was committed by a junior analyst in the same company. However, the type of transgression each actor committed varied across conditions. Therefore, the design included instances when the transgressions matched (i.e., both actors filed false expense reports; both actors stole electronics equipment) and instances when the transgressions did not match (i.e., the Vice President filed a false expense report and the junior analyst stole equipment; the Vice President stole equipment and the junior analyst filed a false expense report).

#### 5.3. Transgression manipulations

The expense report conditions of Study 3 were identical to the transgressions used in Study 2. In short, the transgressor charged over \$3100 to the company credit card for a lavish night out with friends and claimed he was entertaining clients. In the electronics equipment conditions, the transgressor came to the office on a Saturday and took home equipment worth over \$3100. When the first actor stole equipment, participants read that the junior analyst saw the Vice President load several unopened boxes of electronics equipment into his car and later learned from another employee that some new electronics inventory was missing. When the second actor stole equipment, participants read that the junior analyst took home a large TV, computer, and other equipment and used it to create a home entertainment system. All conditions explicitly indicated that the equipment had been misappropriated by the transgressor.

#### 5.4. Measures

All measures included in the study are reported below.

##### 5.4.1. Punishment severity

Study 3 used the same three items as Study 2 ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ).

##### 5.4.2. Punishment recommendation

Participants selected the single most appropriate punishment from a list of options presented in order of increasing severity: (1) Ignore the act, (2) Talk to the person informally, (3) Issue an oral warning, (4) Issue a written warning, (5) Withhold a portion of bonus pay, (6) Put on probation (next infraction terminate), (7) Suspend without pay, (8) Demote to lower position, (9) Terminate. This measure was first developed by Trahan and Steiner (1994) and further refined by Greenberg and Ganegoda (2009).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> We independently validated this scale by asking a separate sample of 100 Amazon Mechanical Turk Workers to rank these punishment options in terms of severity. Respondents’ severity rankings were consistent with the order used in prior research, irrespective of whether we presented the items in the order listed above or in an order that was randomly generated for each respondent (i.e., many different orders).

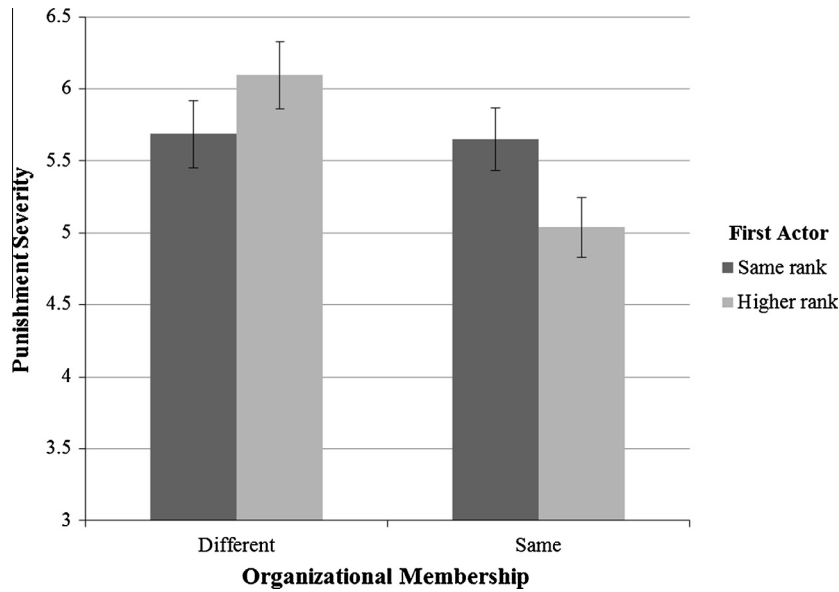


Fig. 2. The effects of organizational membership and first actor rank on punishment in Study 2.

#### 5.4.3. Descriptive norms

Four items assessed participants' perceptions of the descriptive norms that pertained to the second actor's behavior: (1) In this company, it is pretty common for people to do what [the second actor] did; (2) I think a lot of people who work for this company have done what [the second actor] did; (3) [The second actor] did something that a lot of people in their organization would do; (4) [The second actor] acted outside the range of normal behavior for this organization [reverse-scored]. Participants responded on 7-point scales that ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Responses were averaged for analysis ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

#### 5.4.4. Attributions of blame

Five items assessed blame for the second actor's behavior by asking participants how much they agreed with the following statements: (1) It is completely [the second actor]'s fault that he did something wrong; (2) [The second actor] is solely to blame for his behavior; (3) [The second actor] is fully responsible for his actions; (4) [The first actor] deserves some of the blame for [the second actor]'s behavior (reverse coded); (5) [The first actor] is partially responsible for [the second actor]'s behavior (reverse coded). Participants responded on 7-point scales that ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Exploratory factor analysis with an oblique rotation assessed the extent to which the items that asked about blame for the second actor's transgression were related; that is, it tested whether people tended to blame the second actor less when they blamed the first actor (and vice versa). The analysis yielded a one factor solution, which indicates that the items for first actor blame and second actor blame were strongly related. Therefore, we report analyses that use a single index of blame based on the average of the five items after reverse scoring items 4–5 ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). However, we also ran mediational analyses using separate blame indices for the second (items 1–3) and first actor (items 4–5) and found that the pattern of results is the same, regardless of whether analyses use one or two indices of blame for the second actor's behavior.

### 5.5. Results

#### 5.5.1. Punishment severity

A 2 (First Actor Transgression: expense report, electronics equipment)  $\times$  2 (Second Actor Transgression: expense report, elec-

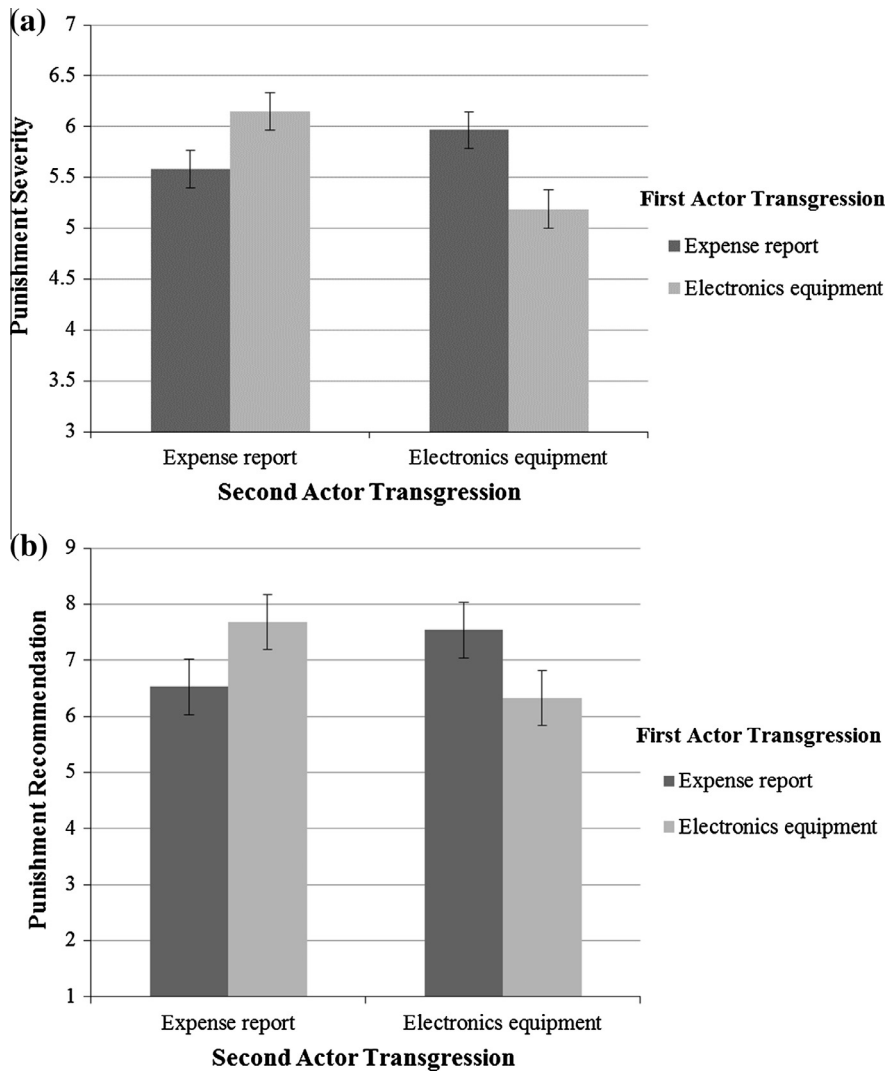
tronics equipment) ANOVA with punishment severity as the dependent variable found no significant main effect for either first actor transgression,  $F(1, 148) = 0.31$ ,  $p = 0.58$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ , or second actor transgression,  $F(1, 148) = 2.39$ ,  $p = 0.13$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ . However, the interaction of first and second actor transgression was significant,  $F(1, 148) = 13.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$ . Analyses of simple effects investigated punishment severity as a function of whether the two actors committed the same or different transgressions (see Fig. 3a). When the second actor falsified an expense report, punishment was less severe when the first actor also falsified an expense report ( $M = 5.58$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) than when the first actor stole electronics ( $M = 6.15$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ),  $F(1, 148) = 4.73$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ . When the second actor stole electronics, punishment was less severe when first actor stole electronics ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) than when the first actor falsified an expense report ( $M = 5.97$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ),  $F(1, 148) = 8.76$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$ .

#### 5.5.2. Punishment recommendation

A 2 (First Actor Transgression: expense report, electronics equipment)  $\times$  2 (Second Actor Transgression: expense report, electronics equipment) ANOVA with punishment recommendation as the dependent variable found no significant main effect for either first actor transgression,  $F(1, 148) = 0.07$ ,  $p = 0.94$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ , or second actor transgression,  $F(1, 148) = 0.25$ ,  $p = 0.62$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ .<sup>4</sup> However, the interaction of first and second actor transgression was significant,  $F(1, 148) = 11.67$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$ . Analyses of simple effects investigated punishment recommendation as a function of whether the two actors committed the same or different transgressions (see Fig. 3b). When the second actor falsified an expense report, punishment was less harsh when the first actor also falsified an expense report ( $M = 6.53$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ) than when the first actor stole electronics ( $M = 7.68$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ),  $F(1, 148) = 5.57$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ . When the second actor stole electronics, punishment was less harsh when first actor stole electronics ( $M = 6.32$ ,  $SD = 2.50$ ) than when the first actor falsified an expense report ( $M = 7.54$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ),  $F(1, 148) = 6.11$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ .

<sup>4</sup> Punishment recommendation is an ordinal variable and therefore violates some assumptions of ANOVA. Therefore, we conducted ordinal regression analyses to verify the robustness of the ANOVA results. All significance tests using ordinal regression matched the results of the ANOVAs. In particular, the interaction of the two manipulations on the punishment recommendations variable was significant, Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 14.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .





**Fig. 3.** (a) The effect of transgression similarity on punishment severity in Study 3. (b) The effect of transgression similarity on punishment recommendations in Study 3.

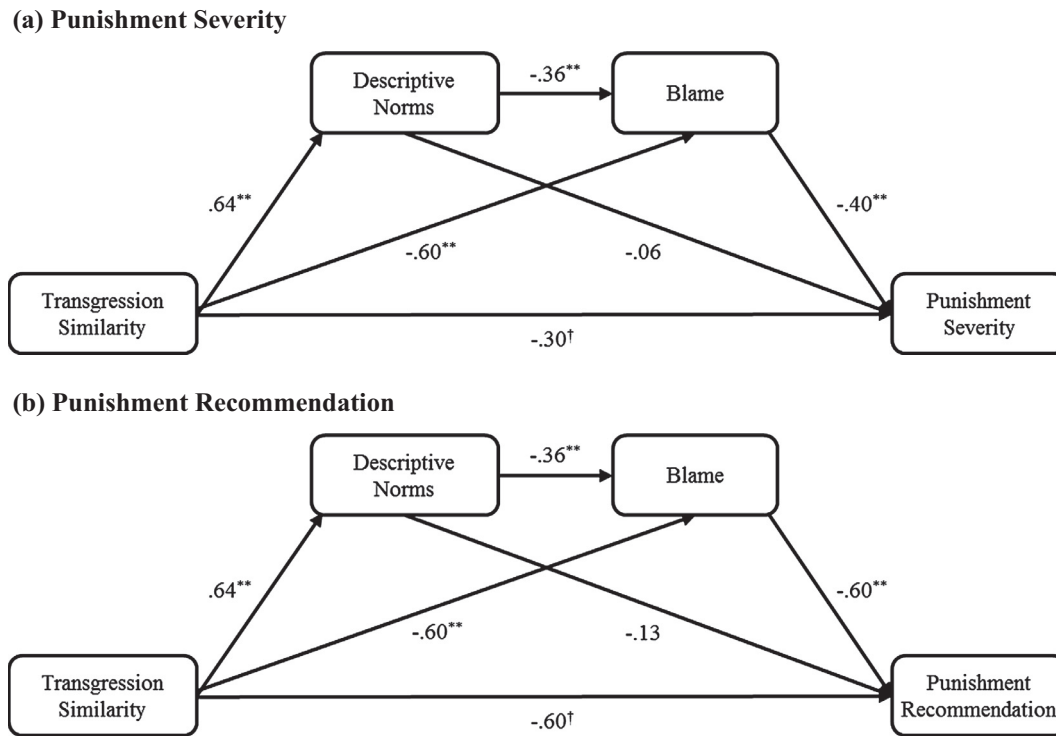
### 5.6. Tests of mediation

We hypothesized that descriptive norms and attributions of blame would mediate the rank-dependent imitation effect on punishment. In Study 3, we operationalized imitation in terms of whether the actors committed the same or different transgressions. In the analyses above, we kept the independent variables separate to illustrate that the rank-dependent imitation effect generalized across transgression type; that is, transgression similarity (i.e., imitation) reduced punishment, regardless of whether both actors submitted fraudulent expense reports or stole electronics equipment. To simplify presentation of the mediation analyses below, we collapsed across the independent variables to form an index of transgression similarity/dissimilarity. However, we did verify that analyses of mediated moderation that model the indirect effects without collapsing across the two independent variables produced the same patterns of results.

Preliminary analyses indicated that attributions of blame and descriptive norms both differed as a function of transgression similarity, that is, whether the first and second actor committed the same or a different transgression (see Supplemental information for details). Therefore, to fully explore the potential relations between the mediator variables, we ran a multi-stage mediation model that estimated the indirect effect of transgression similarity

on punishment through descriptive norms, the indirect effect through attributions of blame, and the two-stage indirect effect through both descriptive norms and blame (Hayes, 2013). This approach allowed us to include both mediators simultaneously and also test the association between descriptive norms and blame.

We tested the models using a bootstrapping procedure that generated 1000 bootstrap samples to estimate the size of the indirect effects. When punishment severity was the criterion (see Fig. 4a), the single-stage indirect effect through blame was significant,  $\beta_c = -0.24$  (confidence interval:  $-0.48, -0.09$ ),  $SE = 0.09$ . The single-stage indirect effect through descriptive norms was not significant,  $\beta_c = -0.04$  (confidence interval:  $-0.15, 0.04$ ),  $SE = 0.05$ . However, the two-stage indirect effect through both descriptive norms and attributions of blame was significant,  $\beta_c = -0.09$  (confidence interval:  $-0.23, -0.03$ ),  $SE = 0.05$ . Results were very similar when punishment recommendation was the criterion (Fig. 4b). Again, the single-stage indirect effect through blame was significant,  $\beta_c = -0.36$  (confidence interval:  $-0.69, -0.12$ ),  $SE = 0.14$ . The single-stage indirect effect through descriptive norms was not significant,  $\beta_c = -0.09$  (confidence interval:  $-0.30, 0.07$ ),  $SE = 0.09$ . However, the two-stage indirect effect through both descriptive norms and attributions of blame was significant,  $\beta_c = -0.14$  (confidence interval:  $-0.35, -0.04$ ),  $SE = 0.07$ . Taken together, the mediation models for both operationalizations of



**Fig. 4.** (a and b) Statistical models of the rank-dependent imitation effect on punishment through perceived commonness and attributions of blame in Study 3. *Note.* \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; † $p < 0.10$ .

punishment support Hypotheses 2a and 2c, but do not support Hypothesis 2b.

### 5.7. Discussion

Study 3 found evidence that the rank-dependent imitation effect is action-specific; observers are less inclined to punish transgressors when their behavior exactly matches a high-ranking individual's bad behavior compared to when their behavior is of the same economic magnitude but otherwise different from a high-ranking individual's bad behavior. One important implication of this finding is that imitation has a unique influence on punishment, above and beyond the extent to which dissimilar prior transgressions promote leniency for subsequent transgressions. Given that all conditions of Study 3 included two transgressions, differences in punishment between conditions in which the transgressions were the same or different cannot be explained by the broader concept of ethical climate.

Study 3 also provided direct evidence of the processes responsible for the rank-dependent imitation effect. Mediation analyses indicated that attributions of blame play a central role in the imitation effect; imitation influences punishment because it affects whom observers blame for the second transgression. The more people blame the first actor, the less they tend to blame the imitator (and vice versa), which in turn influences punishment. Imitation also influenced descriptive norms, which in turn influenced blame and punishment, but all significant indirect effects went through blame.

## 6. Study 4

Study 4 addressed some potential limitations of Studies 1–3 and further tested the mechanisms behind the rank-dependent imitation effect. In particular, Study 4 manipulated the rank of both the first and second actor to create an exploratory condition where a high-ranking actor imitated another high-ranking actor. This con-

dition provided an experimental test of role of descriptive norms in the imitation effect. If high-ranking actors' behaviors influence descriptive norms and descriptive norms play a role in the imitation effect, then people should punish both low and high ranking imitators less when they imitate high versus low ranking actors (because the high-ranking first actor's behavior should influence descriptive norms regardless of the rank of the second actor).<sup>5</sup> In short, Study 4 was similar to Study 1, but it manipulated the ranks of both actors. Study 4 also differed from Study 1 because participants were university students who evaluated fellow students at their university. Furthermore, Study 4 used new videos with different actors and a new rank manipulation to address generalizability.

### 6.1. Participants

Two hundred undergraduate students at a large, public university earned \$5.00 to complete the study. We excluded data from seven respondents who failed one or both of the attention checks used in Study 1; three participants failed to successfully solve the sample matrix, two participants failed to mark "slightly agree" when requested, and two participants failed both attention checks. The resultant sample ( $N = 193$ ) was 74% female and ranged in age from 18 to 36 ( $M = 20.69$ ,  $SD = 2.10$ ); 57% identified as Asian, 2.6% as African American or Black, 15.5% as Hispanic or Latino/Latina, 1.0% as Native American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, 30.1% as White, and 7.8% as biracial.

### 6.2. Design and procedure

Participants completed the study online. They read that researchers at their university were crowdsourcing the review of video recordings from a study conducted with students at their university during orientation week (i.e., toward the end of summer and before the start of the fall term). The logo of the participants'

<sup>5</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

university was in the corner of every page of the study. Ostensibly, the researchers conducted the study in many rooms simultaneously and were now seeking to identify any irregular behavior. As in Study 1, the people in the videos were asked to solve math matrices, and participants solved a sample matrix before watching the video. We manipulated the rank of each person of the video to create a 2 (First Actor Rank: high rank, low rank)  $\times$  2 (Second Actor Rank: high rank, low rank) design. In all conditions, both actors stole money, and participants were instructed to evaluate the second actor.

### 6.2.1. Rank manipulation

Unlike Study 1, the rank manipulation was presented within the videos rather than in the instructions. We manipulated rank in the video with two types of cues. First, actors in the high rank conditions wore suits, and actors in the low rank conditions wore jeans and a t-shirt. Second, the videos all began with a “spontaneous” conversation between the two actors. The conversation began with a comment designed to draw attention to how the people in the video were dressed, which spurred a brief exchange that included information relevant to rank. In the three conditions where at least one of the actors was wearing a suit, the conversation began with, “You look sharp, man.” In the condition where both actors were low rank and dressed in t-shirts, the conversation began with, “Did you see Chris in his suit today?” In all conditions, the dialogue explained that the people in suits had been team leaders during orientation week, were graduating soon, and had job interviews that day, whereas people in t-shirts were new to campus and would not be graduating soon.

### 6.3. Measures

All measures included in the study are reported below.

#### 6.3.1. Punishment

Punishment for the second actor was measured the same way as in Study 1.

#### 6.3.2. Descriptive norms

The four items from Study 3 assessed participants’ perceptions of the descriptive norms, except the words “organization” and “company” were replaced with “university”. Participants responded on 7-point scales that ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Responses were averaged for analysis ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

#### 6.3.3. Attributions of blame

Six items assessed blame for the second actor’s behavior by asking participants how much they agreed with the following statements: (1) It is completely the [second actor’s] fault that he/she did something wrong; (2) The [second actor] is solely to blame for his/her behavior; (3) The [second actor] is fully responsible for his/her actions; (4) It is partly the fault of the [first actor] that the [second actor] did something wrong. (5) The [first actor] deserves some of the blame for the behavior of the [second actor]; (6) The [first actor] is partially responsible for the behavior of the [second actor]. Participants responded on 7-point scales that ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Exploratory factor analysis with an oblique rotation assessed the extent to which the items that asked about blame for the second actor’s transgression were related; that is, it tested whether people tended to blame the second actor less when they blamed the first actor (and vice versa). Unlike Study 3, the analysis yielded a two factor solution: Items 1–3 loaded together on one factor ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ), and items 4–6 loaded together on a second factor ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), and indicated that blame for the two actors were distinct but related constructs

( $r = -0.51$ ). To fully explore potential differences in how blame for the first and second actor operated in the imitation effect, we used separate indices of blame in analyses.

### 6.4. Results

#### 6.4.1. Manipulation check

Three items at the end of the study asked participant to compare the first and second actors in terms of rank, status, and seniority. Participants responded on 7-point bipolar scales with higher scores indicating that the first actor was higher ranking ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). A 2 (First Actor Rank: high rank, low rank)  $\times$  2 (Second Actor Rank: high rank, low rank) ANOVA found a significant main effect of first actor rank,  $F(1, 187) = 14.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$ . Participants perceived the first actor as higher ranking in the high ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) than low rank conditions ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). The main effect of second actor rank also was significant,  $F(1, 187) = 61.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.25$ . Participants perceived the second actor as higher ranking in the high ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) than low rank conditions ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). The interaction of the two manipulations was not significant,  $F(1, 187) = 1.98$ ,  $p = 0.16$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ .

#### 6.4.2. Punishment

A 2 (First Actor Rank: high rank, low rank)  $\times$  2 (Second Actor Rank: high rank, low rank) ANOVA with punishment as the dependent variable indicated that the main effect of first actor rank was significant,  $F(1, 189) = 5.40$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ . Punishment for the second actor was less severe when the first actor was high ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 4.16$ ) rather than low rank ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 4.93$ ). The main effect of second actor rank was not significant,  $F(1, 189) = 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.82$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ . The interaction of first and second actor rank also was not significant,  $F(1, 189) = 2.15$ ,  $p = 0.14$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$  (see Fig. 5).

Hypothesis 1b pertains to low-ranking second actors. Therefore, we examined the simple effect of first actor rank within the low-ranking second actor conditions. In support of Hypothesis 1b, the imitation effect was significant when the second actor was low rank,  $F(1, 189) = 7.22$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ . Participants punished the low-ranking second actor less severely when he imitated a higher-ranking actor ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 4.24$ ) compared to when he imitated a peer ( $M = 6.30$ ,  $SD = 5.15$ ). We also conducted an exploratory test of how people punish high-ranking imitators by comparing punishment for a high-ranking second actor who either imitated a (high-ranking) peer or someone lower in rank. In this situation, the imitation effect was not significant,  $F(1, 189) = 0.36$ ,  $p = 0.55$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ . Participants punished the high-ranking second actor the same amount, regardless of whether he imitated a similarly high-ranking actor ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 4.67$ ) or a lower-ranking first actor ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 4.09$ ). In short, the results of Study 4 again provide strong support for Hypothesis 1b. Results also suggested that a high-ranking first actor’s transgression does not reduce punishment for a similarly high-ranking imitator, but we discuss the balance of evidence for this claim in the discussion section below.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The simple effect of second actor rank was not significant when the first actor was high ranking,  $F(1, 189) = 0.76$ ,  $p = 0.39$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ . Participants punished the second actor the same amount, regardless of whether he and the first actor both were high ranking or when he was lower ranking than the first actor. On the one hand, this result suggests that only the first actor’s rank, not the difference in ranks between the actors, drives the imitation effect when the first actor is high ranking. On the other hand, comparisons between these conditions may be problematic because people are known to perceive and respond to behavior differently as a function of the actor’s rank (e.g., Becker, 1963; Hollander, 1958; Polman, Pettit, & Wiesenfeld, 2013; Riordan et al., 1983). Therefore, it is ambiguous whether the absence of a difference between these conditions reflects (a) the presence of the imitation effect in both conditions, (b) an imitation effect when the second actor is low ranking and less propensity to punish when the second actor is high ranking, or (c) some combination of the imitation effect and less propensity to punish the high ranking second actor.

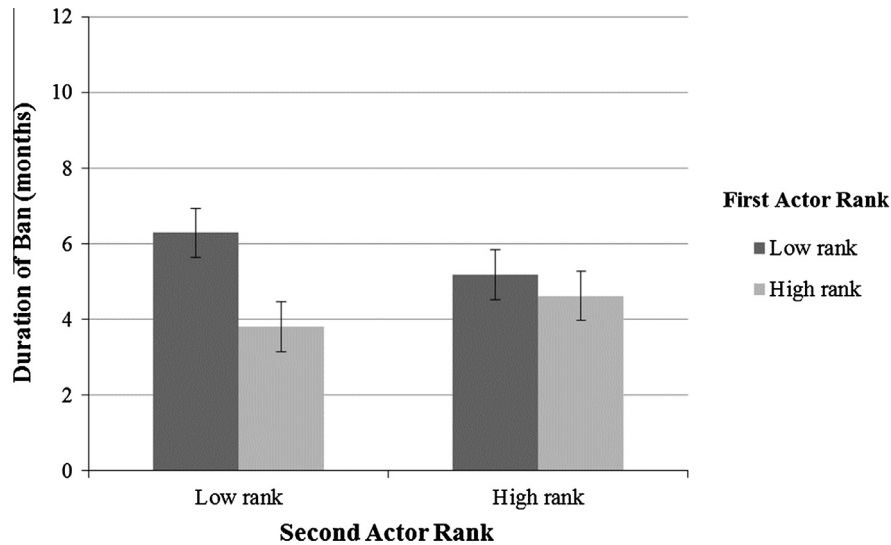


Fig. 5. The effects of first and second actor rank on punishment in Study 4.

## 6.5. Tests of mediation

### 6.5.1. Estimation of indirect effects

We hypothesized that descriptive norms and attributions of blame would mediate the rank-dependent imitation effect on punishment. As with our tests of Hypothesis 1b, our tests of Hypotheses 2a–c focused on the low-ranking second actor conditions because these were the only conditions that pertain directly to our hypotheses (i.e., the only conditions that allow us to compare the effect of imitating a peer versus a higher-ranked other). However, we also wanted to explore whether imitation of a peer vs. a lower-ranked other affected blame for the second actor. Therefore, we planned to conduct analyses of mediated moderation that tested the indirect effect of first actor rank on punishment through blame depending on whether the second actor was low rank or high rank, but preliminary analyses indicated that attributions of blame—but not descriptive norms—differed as a function of the rank of the two actors (see Supplemental information for details). As a result, we report analyses below that focus on the role of blame for the first and second actors (see Fig. 6a).

We conducted separate analyses for each index of blame because the factor analysis we reported above indicated that blame for the first and second actors were partially dependent. Models that include multiple mediators simultaneously estimate the indirect effect through each mediator controlling for other mediators in the model (Hayes, 2013); therefore, multiple mediator models are useful for estimating the unique contribution of each mediator, but they underrepresent the total contribution of each mediator. Given that we are interested in whether people shift blame from the second actor to the first, our research question is more closely related to the total indirect effect through each mediator (as opposed to unique indirect effects).

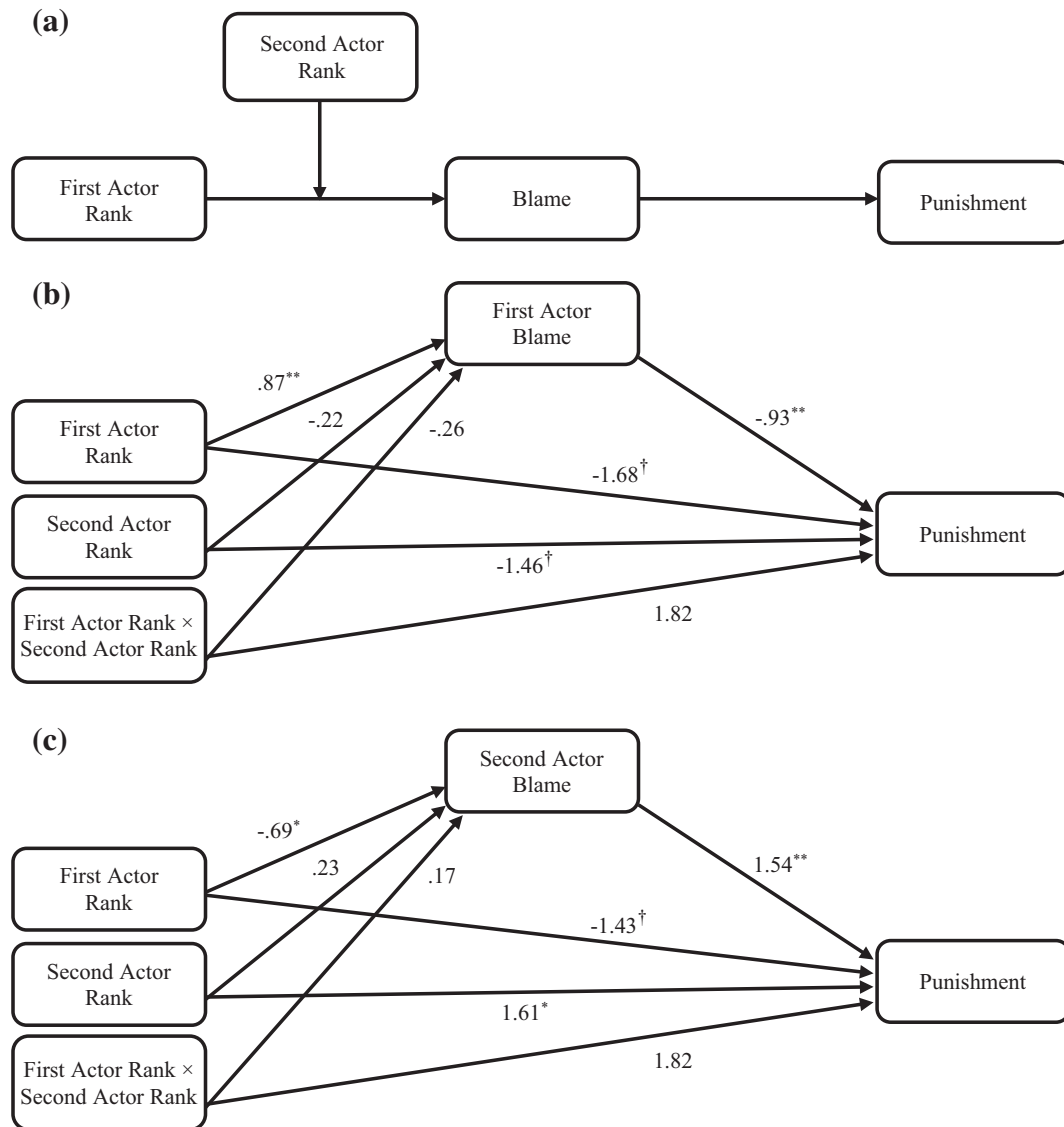
Bootstrapping procedures with 1000 bootstrap samples separately estimated the size of the indirect effects of first actor rank on punishment through blame as a function of whether the second actor was high or low rank (Hayes, 2013). In the model that included first actor blame as the mediator (see Fig. 6b), the indirect effect was significant when the second actor was low rank,  $\beta_c = -0.81$  (confidence interval:  $-1.75, -0.24$ ),  $z = -2.36$ ,  $p = 0.02$ , and only marginally significant when the second actor was high rank,  $\beta_c = -0.57$  (confidence interval:  $-1.32, -0.05$ ),  $z = -1.77$ ,  $p = 0.08$ . In the model that included second actor blame as the mediator (see Fig. 6c), the indirect effect was significant when the second

actor was low rank,  $\beta_c = -1.06$  (confidence interval:  $-2.41, -0.20$ ),  $z = -2.10$ ,  $p = 0.04$ , but not significant when the second actor was high rank,  $\beta_c = -0.81$  (confidence interval:  $-1.83, 0.13$ ),  $z = -1.60$ ,  $p = 0.11$ . In sum, the results provided further support for Hypothesis 2a but no support for Hypotheses 2b or 2c.

## 6.6. Discussion

Study 4 replicated the rank-dependent imitation effect and supported Hypothesis 1b using a new set of videos and a new rank manipulation. Study 4 also provided additional tests of the mechanisms responsible for the rank-dependent imitation effect. As in Study 3, we found robust evidence that attributions of blame mediated the imitation effect, which supports Hypothesis 2a. However, we found no evidence for Hypothesis 2b or 2c. Descriptive norms were unaffected by the rank of the actors in Study 4 and did not contribute significantly to any indirect effects in statistical tests of mediation. Although speculative, one potential explanation for the absence of change in descriptive norms is because participants in Study 4 observed transgressions in a familiar situation within their own organization and likely had a well-developed sense of the descriptive norms for behavior. In other words, the behavior high-ranking individuals may not necessarily be sufficient to affect perceived descriptive norms. Nevertheless, the high-ranking individuals' behavior may still influence attributions of blame and affect punishment (as was also indicated in Study 3 by the strong direct effect of transgression similarity on blame that was independent of the indirect effect through descriptive norms). Taken together, the combined results of Studies 3 and 4 suggest that attributions of blame play a central role in the rank-dependent imitation effect. Changes in perceived descriptive norms can, at least in some instances, also contribute to the rank-dependent imitation effect by influencing attributions of blame. However, changes in perceived descriptive norms are neither necessary nor sufficient to produce the rank-dependent imitation effect.

Study 4 also included an exploratory condition in which we were able to compare punishment of high ranking individuals when they imitated either a high-ranking peer or someone lower-ranking. Results were somewhat mixed. On the one hand, the main effect of first actor rank was significant, and the interaction of first and second actor rank was not significant. These results suggest that first actor rank was sufficient to induce an imitation effect. On the other hand, the most direct test (the simple effect



**Fig. 6.** (a–c) Conceptual and statistical models of the effects of first and second actor rank on punishment through blame for the first or second actor in Study 4. Notes. \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$ .

with the high-ranking second actor condition) found no evidence of the imitation effect when the second actor was high rank; people punished the high ranking second actor the same amount, regardless of whether he imitated a high or low ranking first actor. Moreover, the logic of including this condition was founded on the notion that high-ranking individuals may establish descriptive norms for behaviors regardless of who may be imitating them, but we found no evidence in this study that descriptive norms were driving the effect. Taken together, our exploratory analyses here indicate that the imitation effect is robust when the second actor is low rank but it may be much less pronounced (and perhaps absent) when the second actor is high rank.

## 7. Study 5

Study 5 explored another boundary condition of the rank-dependent imitation effect to help identify interventions that can eliminate the effect. Studies 3 and 4 indicate that the first actor's behavior can serve as an excuse or justification for the second transgression and mitigate blame and punishment for the imitator. We expect that clear information that the first actor was punished

for the initial transgression should eliminate the potential to view the first actor's behavior as an excuse or justification. Therefore, Study 5 manipulated the rank of the first actor and information about whether the first actor was punished. We expected that observers would recommend less severe punishment when a transgressor imitated a higher rather than same rank person and punishment for the first actor was ambiguous. However, punishment would be high, regardless of rank, when it was clear that the first actor was punished.

### 7.1. Participants

Two hundred Amazon Mechanical Turk Workers earned \$1.00 to complete the study. All were residents of the United States. We excluded data from 13 respondents who failed one or both attention checks: (1) "To indicate you are reading carefully, please mark slightly agree." (2) Participants spent less than seven seconds on the page that presented the scenario (i.e., we excluded people who spent less than 1/10th of the average time; *Mean* = 72.3 s; *Median* = 56.2 s). The resultant sample ( $N = 187$ ) was 46% female, and ranged in age from 18 to 72 ( $M = 33.83$ ,  $SD = 10.25$ ); 79.7%

identified as White, 8.0% as African American or Black, 7.5% as Asian, 4.8% as Hispanic or Latino/Latina, and 1.1% as Native American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander. Nearly all had more than one year of full-time work experience (97.3%), including 45.7% who had more than 11 years of experience.

## 7.2. Design and procedure

The experiment was a 2 (First Actor Rank: higher rank, same rank)  $\times$  2 (Punishment Information: present, absent) between-subjects design, which was embedded in the expense report vignette used in Studies 2 and 3. All measures included in the study are reported below.

### 7.2.1. First actor rank manipulation

Participants in the higher rank condition read that the first actor was as a Vice President. Participants in the same rank condition read that the first actor was a junior analyst. The second actor was a junior analyst across all conditions.

### 7.2.2. Punishment information

The vignette varied information about whether the first actor was punished. In the punishment information present condition, participants read that the second actor heard from his coworkers that the company disciplined the first actor for misrepresenting the purpose of the expenses on the expense report. Participants in the punishment information absent condition read no information about whether the first actor was punished.

### 7.2.3. Punishment severity

Study 5 used the three items from Studies 2 and 3 ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ).

### 7.2.4. Descriptive norms

Study 5 used the four items from Study 3 ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

### 7.2.5. Attributions of blame

Study 5 used the five items from Study 3. Exploratory factor analysis with an oblique rotation assessed the extent to which the items that asked about blame for the second actor's transgression were related. As in Study 3, the analysis yielded a one factor solution, which indicates that the five items were strongly related. Therefore, we used a single index of blame based on the average of the five items after reverse scoring items 4–5 ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

## 7.3. Results

### 7.3.1. Manipulation check

Four items at the end of the study assessed whether participants perceived the rank manipulation as intended. Participants indicated “how prestigious” and “how high in status” the junior analyst ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) and Vice President ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) jobs were using 7-point scales that ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*. A repeated measures ANOVA confirmed that participants perceived Vice Presidents ( $M = 6.47$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) as higher in rank than junior analysts ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ),  $F(1, 186) = 893.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.83$ .

### 7.3.2. Punishment

A 2 (First Actor Rank: higher rank, same rank)  $\times$  2 (Punishment Information: present, absent) ANOVA with punishment severity as the dependent variable indicated that the main effect for first actor rank was significant,  $F(1, 183) = 14.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$ . Punishment for the second actor was less severe when the first actor was higher rank ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) rather than the same rank as the second actor ( $M = 6.04$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ). The main effect for punishment information also was significant,  $F(1, 183) = 12.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,

$\eta_p^2 = 0.07$ . Punishment for the second actor was less severe when punishment information about the first actor was absent ( $M = 5.47$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) than present ( $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). Additionally, the interaction of first actor rank and punishment information was significant,  $F(1, 183) = 4.81$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ .

Analyses of simple effects investigated the effect of first actor rank when punishment information about the first actor was absent and present (see Fig. 7). When punishment information about the first actor was absent, punishment for the second actor was less severe when the first actor was higher rank rather than the same rank,  $F(1, 183) = 17.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$ . When punishment information about the first actor was present, however, punishment for the second actor was the same, irrespective of whether the first actor was higher ranking or the same rank,  $F(1, 183) = 1.27$ ,  $p = 0.26$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ . In short, clear punishment information about the first actor eliminated the rank-dependent imitation effect. Therefore, Study 5 provided further support for Hypothesis 1b and also indicated that the rank-dependent imitation effect is contingent on ambiguity about the consequences for the first actor.<sup>7</sup>

### 7.3.3. Estimation of indirect effects

Study 5 provided additional tests of whether blame and descriptive norms mediated the rank-dependent imitation effect on punishment. Preliminary analyses found a significant interaction of first actor rank and punishment information for attributions of blame, not descriptive norms (see Supplemental information for details). Therefore, we focused on the role of blame. Specifically, a mediated moderation analysis used a bootstrapping procedure with 1000 bootstrap samples to estimate the size of the indirect effects of first actor rank on punishment through blame as a function of whether punishment information was present or absent (see Fig. 8a). When punishment information was absent, the indirect effect was significant,  $\beta_c = -0.55$  (confidence interval:  $-0.94$ ,  $-0.24$ ),  $z = -3.81$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . When punishment information was present, however, the indirect effect was not significant,  $\beta_c = -0.17$  (confidence interval:  $-0.39$ ,  $0.02$ ),  $z = -1.27$ ,  $p = 0.20$ . The non-significant indirect effect when punishment information as present is not surprising given that the direct effect was not significant in the first place. In sum, the results provided further support for Hypothesis 2a but no support for Hypothesis 2b.

## 7.4. Discussion

Study 5 replicated the rank-dependent imitation effect once again, but it also identified an important boundary condition of the effect: The rank-dependent imitation effect can be eliminated by clearly communicating that the first person to commit a transgression was punished. Study 5 also provided further evidence that blame, not descriptive norms, is the primary mechanism responsible for the imitation effect.

## 8. General discussion

Negative social consequences (e.g., loss of respect, stigma, ostracism) that peers can impose on transgressors are a major deterrent of unethical behavior (e.g., Hollinger & Clark, 1982;

<sup>7</sup> We also included an item at the end of the survey that asked whether the first actor was disciplined for misusing the credit card, which allowed us to test whether punishment severity for the second actor differed depending on whether participants believed that the first actor was unpunished or that punishment for the first actor was uncertain. Results indicated that the imitation effect existed both when people assumed the first actor went unpunished and when punishment for the first actor was uncertain. Therefore, results indicate that punishment must be explicit to mitigate the imitation effect.

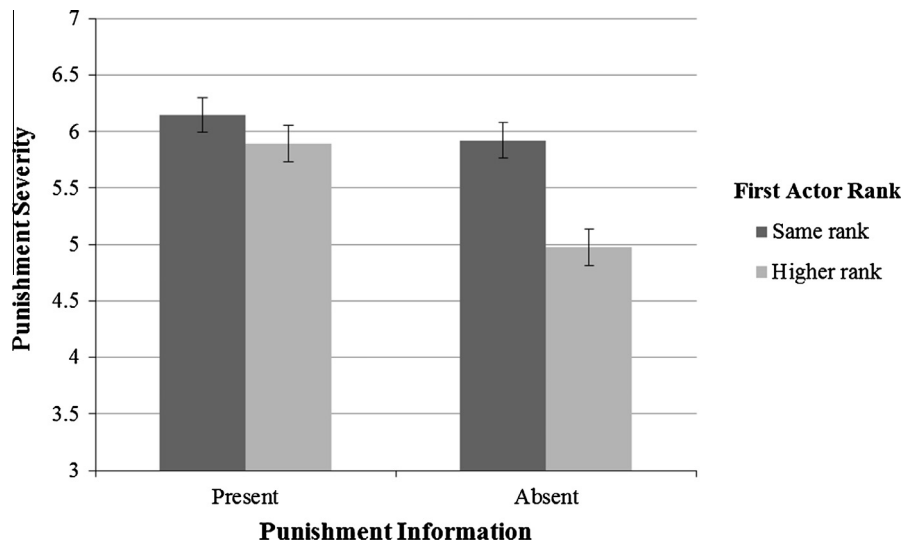


Fig. 7. The effects of punishment information and first actor rank on punishment severity in Study 5.

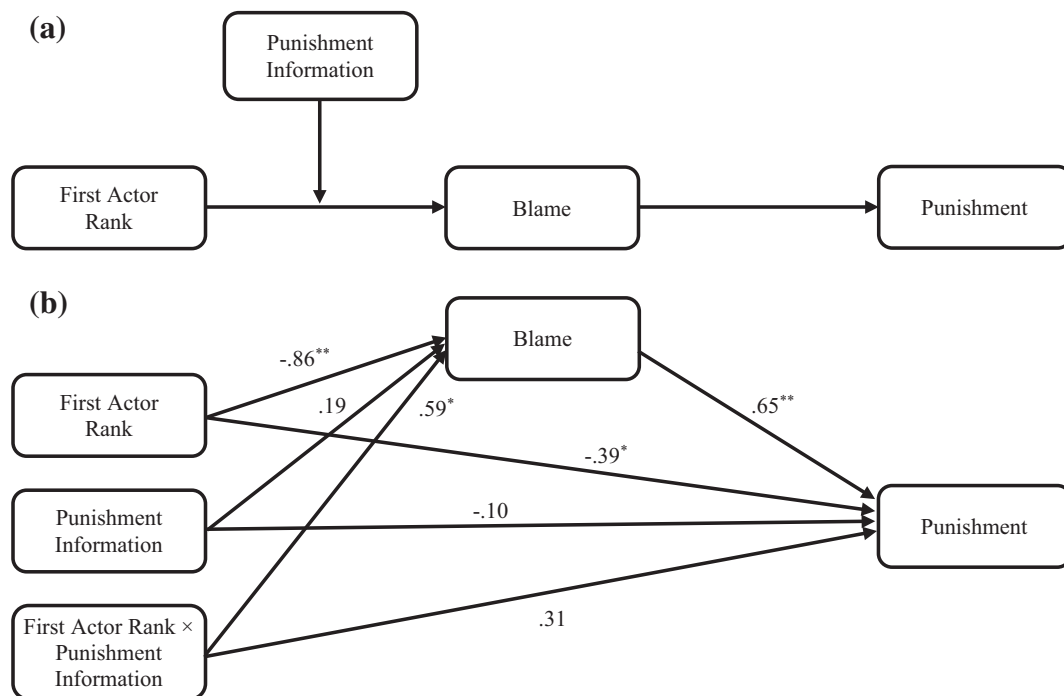


Fig. 8. (a and b) Conceptual and statistical models of the effects of first actor rank and punishment information on punishment through attributions of blame in Study 5. Notes. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Titte, 1977; Titte & Logan, 1973; Zimring & Hawkins, 1973). Employees' inclination to punish coworkers' misbehavior is also an integral part of peer monitoring programs, which play an essential role in companies' efforts to combat asset misappropriation (Association of Fraud Examiners, 2014; see also Weaver et al., 1999). However, employees' views of transgressions reflect more than simple comparisons of behaviors and rules. In the current research, five studies examined behaviors that were unambiguously against an organization's rules and found evidence of a rank-dependent imitation effect: people were relatively tolerant of unethical behavior when transgressors imitated someone who outranked them compared to when transgressors imitated a peer or committed a transgression no one else committed recently. However, the rank-dependent imitation effect only emerged when

the two actors belonged to the same organization (Study 2), when there was a high degree of similarity between the behaviors committed by the two actors (Study 3), and in the absence of clear information about whether the instigator was punished (Study 5). Together, our findings indicate that people interpret and punish unethical behavior differently depending on whom, if anyone, has previously committed similar transgressions.

To understand why the rank-dependent imitation effect exists, we examined whom people blamed for the second transgression and whether transgressions committed by high ranking individuals influenced observers' perceptions of the descriptive norms for the behavior. Observers' decisions about whether to blame the first or second actor for the second transgression consistently depended on the rank of the initial transgressor, and differences in

attributions of blame affected punishment. Moreover, attributions of blame played a central role in the rank-dependent imitation effect in Studies 3, 4, and 5, independent of any changes in descriptive norms. In contrast, the role of descriptive norms in the imitation effect appeared to be weaker, more ancillary, and may be conditional on the strength of observers' prior beliefs about the norms for the behavior within the organization; Study 3 suggested that descriptive norms can indirectly influence punishment through blame, but we found no evidence that descriptive norms play a role in the rank-dependent imitation effect in Studies 4 and 5. Overall, we conclude that the rank-dependent imitation effect emerges primarily due to how the initial transgressor's rank influences whom people blame for the imitator's behavior.

Our research extends theories of retributive justice and punishment by examining a downstream consequence of transgressions committed by high-ranking members of organizations. Prior research has mainly focused on relatively stable characteristics of transgressors and transgressions on punishment (e.g., Arvey & Jones, 1985; Darley & Pittman, 2003; Fragale et al., 2009). For example, actors' position in a hierarchy influences how much punishment they receive for a given offense (Feather, 1994; Fragale et al., 2009). However, our research suggests that important interrelationships exist between stable characteristics of transgressors (e.g., rank) and more fleeting features of situations (e.g., recent misconduct) when it comes to assigning blame and meting out punishment. In particular, our research suggests that "tall poppies" (i.e., high-ranking actors; Feather, 1994) who misbehave cast a shadow that can partially deflect blame and punishment for imitators. People may report *schadenfreude*, or pleasure in others' misfortune when tall poppies fall from grace (cf. Feather, 2006), but we find they are especially sympathetic of lower-ranked actors who follow bad role models. Given that many approaches to resolve conflict and repair relationships are rooted in descriptive models of justice (e.g., Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2014; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004), it is important to identify special cases, such as imitation, that change the way people perceive rule violations and determine an appropriate amount of punishment for the offense.

Our research also contributes to research on behavioral ethics and ethical contagion within organizations by showing how unethical behavior can change the environment in which subsequent behaviors take place. Behavioral ethics research traditionally has examined events through the lens of individual decision making and, accordingly, has conceptualized behavior as the terminus of a process. Although individual-level models of ethical decision making frequently acknowledge that others' behavior has an important influence on (un)ethical behavior, relatively little attention has been given to articulating the processes and conditions under which one actor's behavior affects others' behavior. Social processes (e.g., group membership, identity, hierarchy, socialization) are especially influential in organizations (Brief & Smith-Crowe, 2016). Therefore, it is important to better understand the causal linkages across instances of unethical behavior, which often are underspecified in models of individuals' ethical decision making.

By exploring how observers respond to people who follow bad role models, our research adds a new perspective that complements recent research on how social learning processes influence ethical and unethical behavior in organizations. It is now well established that prior instances of unethical behavior can prompt others to misbehave (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2009; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998; see also Bandura, 1986), but our research is the first to reveal that prior instances of unethical behavior can change observers' interpretations and responses to subsequent transgressions; people are less apt to blame and more likely to pardon lower-ranked imitators. Moreover, the

rank-dependent imitation effect may help create a psychological loophole that can perpetuate bad behavior in organizations. Specifically, bad role models appear to simultaneously disinhibit imitation and exonerate imitators. Given that punishment expectations directly influence ethical decision making and people's propensity to engage in unethical behavior (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Treviño, 1986; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990), future research should investigate whether or how often imitators are aware that people are more lenient on imitators and use it in their calculus of when to act opportunistically.

Our results also have implications for social learning theory because they suggest that there are some similarities and some differences in how modeling influences actors (i.e., second-party decisions about whether to imitate transgressions) and observers (i.e., third-party judgments of subsequent transgressions). One similarity is that ingroup membership is important to both second- and third-party judgment and behavior. Prior research on second-party judgment found that student participants in an experiment were more likely to misreport their performance to increase their economic outcome when someone else cheated first and was a student from their own school rather than from another school (Gino et al., 2009). Likewise, our research found that third-party judgment of imitation only emerges when the first transgressor and the imitator are from the same organization. However, rank appears to affect imitation differently across second- and third-party judgment. Specifically, prior research indicates that peer behavior affects second-party judgment and behavior (e.g., Gino et al., 2009; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998; Zey-Ferrell & Ferrell, 1982), whereas our research shows that third-party judgment is influenced less by behavior enacted by the imitators' peers than by the imitators' superiors. Therefore, a higher-ranking instigator or behavioral model appears to be a necessary condition for modeling to affect third-party (but not second-party) judgments about unethical behavior.

Our research also has implications for the literature on whistleblowing. Prior research indicates that fear of retaliation is a major concern that affects employees' willingness to report unethical behavior, and both leaders and peers must have reputations for ethical behavior for fear of retaliation to be low (Mayer et al., 2013). In other words, ethical leadership on its own is insufficient to change reporting behavior; people need to feel supported by those in positions above and across from them in the organizational hierarchy to overcome barriers to reporting that are rooted in self-interest. Our results add to this story in two key ways. First, our results indicate that the behavior of other people in an organization affects the extent to which people blame actors for their offenses. Thus, our studies suggest that modeling shifts the perceived root of the problem, which in turn changes the barriers to and the potential consequences of reporting the event. Second, our results indicate that punishment for imitators hinges on the prior behavior of higher-ranking actors, not peers, which differs from what Mayer et al. (2013) found for fear of retaliation. In other words, leader behavior on its own is sufficient to influence affect the amount of blame and punishment imitators receive. Taken together, the results of our studies and those of Mayer et al. combine to provide a clearer picture of when and how social information can interfere with employee monitoring processes.

### 8.1. Limitations

Our studies document the rank-dependent imitation effect in multiple samples, using different methods, and across various operationalizations of punishment. Taken together, the differences across the five experiments provide some evidence of the robustness of our results. However, one potential limitation of the current research is that all of the studies involve unethical behaviors of a



somewhat limited scale (e.g., single instances of expense report fraud or equipment theft). Despite being unambiguously unethical, these behaviors are small enough that they do not have major repercussions for the company. Additionally or alternatively, people may be more willing to make situational attributions for discrete events such as these than for larger-scale or sustained unethical behavior (e.g., embezzling millions of dollars in company funds or repeated instances of fraud or theft). More severe cases of unethical conduct have greater moral intensity (Jones, 1991). Observers may therefore be more reluctant to make situational attributions for more severe behavior and feel that transgressors should be punished whether or not they imitated others. In sum, the scope of the rank-dependent imitation effect is unclear based on the current evidence, and future research should seek to establish boundary conditions of the effect in terms of the scale or sustained nature of the transgression.

Another limitation is that our studies do not systematically examine the imitation effect across the many possible differences in rank that may exist between instigators and imitators. Future research could test whether imitating an immediate supervisor is different from imitating an even higher-ranked authority. The rank-dependent imitation effect may be stronger when people imitate an immediate than distant supervisor because immediate supervisors have more direct influence and more contact with the imitator. Results of Study 2 are generally supportive of the notion that observers are more likely to take prior transgressions into account when the first actor is proximate (in the same organization) rather than distant from the imitator (in a different organization). However, it is also possible that the rank-dependent imitation effect may be stronger when people imitate a distant than immediate supervisor because higher-ranking supervisors have more formal authority and higher status in the organization, which contributes to their perceived credibility as role models (Bandura, 1986; Brown et al., 2005). Future research could investigate these potential conditions of the rank-dependent imitation effect.

Future research also should further investigate the potential role of descriptive norms in the imitation effect. In our studies, we observed changes in descriptive norms as a function of the first actor's behavior in Study 3, but not in Studies 4 or 5, and it is not clear what accounted for the differences between studies. One possibility is that perceptions of descriptive norms are differently malleable across situations. Given that prior research indicates that descriptive norms can have powerful effects on the perceived permissibility of unethical behavior (Cialdini et al., 1990; Gino et al., 2009; Mayer et al., 2013; see also Moore & Gino, 2013), it would be useful to better understand the conditions under which perceived descriptive norms are susceptible to influence.

## 8.2. Practical implications

The current research indicates that high-ranking actors' transgressions may absolve lower-ranking actors from blame and punishment for committing the same transgression. Any impunity for high-ranking actors' transgressions may therefore represent an important impediment to the promotion of ethical behavior across organizational levels. Therefore, our findings underscore the importance of clearly and explicitly communicating that transgressors, especially high-ranking transgressors, have been punished for any unethical actions. Notably, the results of Study 5 suggest that it is not necessary to provide extensive details about exactly how a transgressor was punished. It is sufficient to simply convey that the transgressor was held accountable, which suggests that it should be possible to eliminate the imitation effect without providing details that could trigger concerns about privacy or fairness (e.g., Treviño, 1992).

## 9. Conclusion

Our research indicates that people are less apt to punish those who imitate bad behavior committed by higher-ranking members of the organization than those who imitate peers or commit transgressions no one else committed recently. Specifically, prior transgressions committed by high-ranking actors influence who observers blame when low-ranking members of the same organization imitate the transgression, and these shifts in blame, in turn, decrease punishment for imitators. Importantly, these results demonstrate how unethical behavior changes the environment in which subsequent behavior is enacted and evaluated, and highlight the need for more research to identify the processes and conditions. That is, future research should explore in greater detail the causal linkages across instances of unethical behavior in organizations, which have often been unspecified in models of individuals' ethical decision making.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2016.08.006>.

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