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Randsley de Moura, Georgina and Abrams, Dominic (2013) Bribery, blackmail, and the double standard for leader transgressions. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 17 (1). pp. 43-52. ISSN 1089-2699.

DOI

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Bribery, Blackmail, and the Double Standard for Leader Transgressions

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Published version available

Randsley de Moura, G., & Abrams, D. (2013). Bribery, blackmail, and the double standard for leader transgressions. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 17(1), 43.

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Acknowledgements: We are grateful to members of GroupLab at the Centre for the Study of Group Processes for comments on the design of this research.

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Word count 4814

Abstract

How does a person's leadership or membership role within a group affect how others judge their transgressions? Participants evaluated either a leader or a regular member of either an ingroup or an outgroup who transgressed by engaging in either bribery (Experiment 1) or blackmail (Experiment 2). In both experiments transgressors were judged less punitively if they were ingroup leaders than ingroup members, outgroup members or outgroup leaders. The severity of the transgression and whether it served group interests did not alter this effect, which shows that people may apply a double standard to an ingroup leader's transgressions. Implications are discussed for the spread of corruption among leaders and followers.

Keywords: Leadership, Transgression, Groups, Corruption, Deviance

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." Lord Acton, 1887

Google News for the last 12 months revealed 682000 hits for the terms scandal, bribery, blackmail, corruption, or cheating, of which 7% included the term 'leader'. Given that many of the groups are large, this suggests that leaders are highly likely to be linked in some way with transgression in their groups. Leader scandals arise in the forms of corruption, cheating or malpractice in business, politics, sport and other arenas. The Watergate scandal springs to mind, and more recently, when the world's largest selling newspaper, The News of The World, engaged in telephone hacking, it took many years before any of the editors or senior executives were forced to resign. Examples of corrupt leadership also exist in academic psychology.

It is known that ingroup members who behave in socially undesirable ways are generally derogated more than normative members or normative or deviant outgroup members (Marques & Paez, 1994), a so-called 'black sheep effect'. Indeed, the black sheep effect is stronger the more established the deviant is within the group (Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010). This paper contends that the accentuation of differences between deviants and non-deviants may *not* be true if the deviant is a group leader. If we are right in thinking that group members tend to allow their leaders to deviate from norms, or even to transgress rules, this may even facilitate a perpetuation and widening of a circle of corruption. Given the pivotal level of responsibility held by group leaders, their transgressions, if discovered, have the potential to cause havoc and devastation for the group (e.g., for example, the closing down of Britain's most widely read news paper, The News of the World). Therefore, it is particularly

important to understand whether psychological aspects of group membership create a space for corrupt leadership.

Previous research indicates that people may treat non-conformist leaders more favorably than similar non-leaders. For example, leaders who are trusted can deviate more from group norms (e.g. Fiske, 2010; Hollander, 1958) and have greater influence than other group members (e.g. Pescosolido, 2001). Recent evidence suggests that members of organizations react less punitively to disappointing leaders if those leaders have provided benefits for that member (Shapiro, Boss, Salas, Targiarla, & von Glinow, 2011).

There are still interesting and novel questions to pursue. Of central importance to understanding perceptions of corrupt leadership is to examine people's responses to transgression. Transgression is distinct from mere opinion deviance or disappointing behavior. Rather than simply failing to adhere to a social norm or code (which people are free to do), transgression involves manifestly breaking a law or rule that applies to all people within a social context. In principle, all transgressors should be treated equally (punitively) before the law.

Previous research has examined reactions to leaders who behave in undesirable ways (e.g. Shapiro et al., 2011) but it has not tested whether people will react differently to transgressions by leaders as compared with transgressions by members. Although theories such as idiosyncrasy credit (Hollander, 1958) suggest that transgressive leaders could be treated more leniently, this prediction is not specified by the theory. Thus, an interesting and important question is whether a transgressor is judged differently merely

because he or she occupies the leadership role rather than being an ordinary group member.

Furthermore, in the present research we consider reactions to deviance in an intergroup context. Social identity theory holds that people are motivated to ensure that their ingroups are distinct from and better than outgroups. Similarly, image theory holds that ingroups and outgroups are evaluated in relative terms (e.g., Alexander, Brewer, & Herrmann, 1999). These images can be used to justify outgroup stereotypes. For example, ingroups may tend to be regarded as more virtuous and justified in their actions than outgroups, which may be demonized (cf. Alexander, Brewer, & Livingston, 2005). It follows that people would also be motivated to ensure that their leaders are clearly different from and better than outgroup leaders, because leaders are usually regarded as the 'best' or most representative member of their group (Hogg, 2001). Some sociological analyses also suggest that outgroup leaders might be more demonized, particularly when groups are in conflict. The so-called "evil-ruler enemy image" suggests that groups might perceive outgroup leaders as corrupt and evil, manipulating the ordinary citizens of the outgroup (White, 1984).

However, based on subjective group dynamics theory (Marques, Paez, & Abrams, 2008) we contend that differential judgments of individual group members within a group can be strongly affected by the intergroup context because people wish to reinforce support for members who best defend the value of their ingroup. When ordinary ingroup members deviate from social norms they are usually derogated more than outgroup members who deviate from those norms, a phenomenon known as the 'black sheep effect' (Marques & Paez, 1994). Recently, Pinto et al. (2010) demonstrated that the black sheep

effect applies more strongly to deviants who are full members of the ingroup than to those who are marginal members.

Social identity theory, image theory, and the subjective group dynamics theory all suggest that transgressions by ingroup and outgroup members may be judged differently and that leadership conveys a special status within the group that may also affect these judgments.. Whereas image theory and social identity theory might imply that people may be motivated to defend the ingroup leader as an icon of the group's image, perhaps overlooking deviance or transgression, the subjective group dynamics model suggests that ingroup deviants may be targets of particularly negative reactions.

Transgressions are much more extreme than opinion deviance, and it could be that this would result in such clearly negative judgments of a transgressor that it would overwhelm both ingroup bias (indicated by social identity theory and image theory) and differences in judgments of ingroup and outgroup deviants. In this case transgressors may be judged by the same consensual standard or law and receive similarly negative reactions regardless of their group membership or their member/leader role within the group. However, central to the present paper is our contention that different standards may be applied to ingroup leaders in intergroup contexts, such that their transgressions may be regarded more favorably/ less punitively than transgressors who are ordinary members or outgroup leaders.

This prediction has a precedent in prior research which showed that leaders who express deviant opinions are sometimes granted 'innovation credit' – greater freedom to strike out in a new direction, as compared with other types of group member (Abrams, Randsley de Moura, Marques, & Hutchison, 2008;

Randsley de Moura, Abrams, Marques, & Hutchison, 2011). The present paper examines whether leaders may also be judged more favorably even when they behave corruptly, and whether reactions to transgressive ingroup leaders are different from reactions to transgressive outgroup leaders.

Transgressive leaders may pose a dilemma for group members because they create a tension between members' desire to uphold consensual standards and rules, and their loyalty to the group, expressed through support for their leader (Lewis, 2011). Leaders are putatively ideal, prototypical representatives of the group (Hogg, 2001). Loyalty is generally a strong prescriptive norm to which group members are expected to adhere, and particularly so in intergroup situations (cf. Abrams, Rutland, Ferrell, & Pelletier, 2008; Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001). Therefore, we contend that whereas people respond critically to transgressions committed by regular ingroup and outgroup members and by outgroup leaders, they will be less critical towards a transgressive ingroup leader, thereby applying a double standard.

In the following experiments participants judged a transgressor who was either a leader or a member from an ingroup or an outgroup. Social identity theory, and image theory, would hypothesize that ingroup members and leaders will, on average, be judged more favorably than outgroup members and leaders (a main effect of Group). However, different theories make different predictions about the interaction between Group and Role. Social identity and image theory may suggest that transgressive ingroup leaders will be judged most favorably and transgressive outgroup leaders least favorably – due to the “evil-ruler” image. Conversely, the subjective group dynamics model suggests that, if possible, ingroup transgressors would be judged less favorably than outgroup

transgressors, and possibly that this effect would be more extreme if the transgressors are leaders. However, based on previous evidence of innovation credit for ingroup leaders we predict the operation of a double standard. Specifically, we expect that an ingroup transgressive leader will be judged less critically than both an ingroup transgressive member and than an outgroup transgressive member or leader. That is, we predict that people may apply one rule to ingroup leaders and another for everyone else.

Experiment 1

The double standard hypothesis was assessed by presenting a scenario that involved an ingroup university and an outgroup university in the South of England. A team from each university was negotiating bids with a governmental agency in a competitive application for substantial infrastructure funding for regional development. The scenario described activities of (the ingroup or outgroup) negotiating team. Either a regular member or leader learned that the committee chair was a fan of rare single malt whiskey, and covertly offered a bribe (in the form of whiskey) in the hope of influencing the decision.

Participants ($N = 41$) were assigned randomly to condition and participated as part of course requirement. Participants were presented with the scenario and then completed dependent measures. A scale from 1 = *not at all*, 4 = *somewhat*, 7 = *completely*, was used to indicate the extent to which the person transgressed (i.e. broken the rules of the situation, either explicit or implicit). A scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely* was used to answer the questions, “Regardless of how people behaved, how plausible is the overall situation described here?”, and “If this situation actually happened, how likely is it that this type of behavior could ever happen?”.

Three items then measured participants' judgments of the transgressor. The question, "How negative or positive do you feel towards this person?" was answered using a slider from -50 to +50. The questions, "To what extent do you approve of what this person did?" and, "To what extent do you think the person should be punished for what they did?" were answered using scales from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*.

Results

Perception of Transgression

The act was perceived as transgressive ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.49$) and the scenario was judged to be quite plausible and likely ($M_s = 3.43, 3.57$; $SD_s = 0.97, 0.97$, respectively). There were no significant effects involving group or role.

Judgments of Transgressor

The feeling, approval, and punitiveness ratings showed that participants felt negatively toward the transgressor ($M_s = -2.44, 3.05, 2.66$, $SD_s = 18.50, 1.17, 1.43$, respectively). Punitiveness was reverse scored and then all three measures were standardized and averaged to form a composite scale ($\alpha = .75$). A 2 x 2 between-participants ANOVA revealed no significant main effect of role of the transgressor, $F(1,37) = 0.38$, $p = .54$, $\eta^2 = .010$, but a significant effect of group, $F(1, 37) = 8.61$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .189$. This was qualified by a significant group x role interaction, $F(1,37) = 14.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .275$, shown in Figure 1.

The absence of a main effect of role suggests that there is no generally protective effect of being a group leader. Moreover, the pattern of the Group x Role interaction is not fully consistent either with the social identity/image theory predictions (that all ingroup transgressors would be judged more favorably than all outgroup transgressors) or those from subjective group dynamics theory (that ingroup

transgressors would be judged more negatively than outgroup transgressors, and a more extreme effect when the transgressors are leaders). Instead, consistent with the double standard hypothesis, a planned comparison between the ingroup leader ($M = .66$, $SD = 0.42$) and all other conditions ($M = -.17$, $SD = 0.81$) was significant, $t(37) = 3.36$, $p = .002$. Post hoc comparison indicated participants were significantly more favorable toward the ingroup leader than the outgroup leader ($p < .001$), and toward the ingroup leader than the ingroup member ($p < .05$). In addition, the outgroup leader was judged less favorably than the outgroup member, perhaps as participants seized the opportunity to condemn a central figure from the outgroup.

In sum, the scenario was plausible and likely, the bribery was viewed as transgressive, and, as hypothesized, a transgressive ingroup leader was evaluated more favorably than all other transgressors. These findings are consistent with the idea that people apply a double standard when evaluating transgressive ingroup leaders.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 1 it was possible that the double standard was applied to the ingroup leader because the transgression was not seen to be very serious. Moreover, perhaps the polarized evaluations of the ingroup and outgroup leader reflected that the transgressions also directly served the interests of their respective groups. Perhaps it is only when a transgression is obviously very serious or when there is no group interest at stake that people will treat their own leaders as they would other transgressors. Moreover, it is possible that people show leniency towards their leaders because they think the leader is genuinely acting in the interests of the group.

In Experiment 2 we tested these ideas using a scenario in which the competitive situation involved ingroup and outgroup countries. There are myriad

examples of allegedly corrupt international practices involving forms of blackmail or pressure to secure deals (e.g. the arrest of Tsvetelin Kanchev, leader of the Bulgarian Euroroma party, who was arrested in 2010, charged with blackmail). The scenario was intended to capture some of the flavor of these while also using a different context; one that did not involve a direct conflict of interests between the groups, and that involved a more serious transgression than that used in Experiment 1.

Specifically, we focused on the clearly criminal transgression of blackmail.

Participants were asked to evaluate an ingroup or outgroup, non-leader or leader, who attempted to blackmail a committee chair. According to our hypothesis a transgressive ingroup leader should be evaluated more favorably than transgressors that are either ingroup non-leaders or that are outgroup leaders or non-leaders.

To ensure that our scenario did not involve a conflict of interest between the groups we conducted pilot work to develop materials for this study. To establish a baseline we tested how leaders and group members would be regarded in various contexts. Relating to the context used for Experiment 2, participants judged ingroup or outgroup leader and member targets in a situation in which the goal was described as being to decide which charities should receive money. As expected we did not find any effects of target group or of role, or an interaction. Participants judged all of the targets favorably (approval $M = 5.06$, punishment $M = 2.35$, feeling $M = 21.43$) and as not having transgressed ($M = 2.61$). Targets were judged to be moderately group serving ($M = 3.85$). This scenario was used for Experiment 2 because the baseline data indicated that there would be no reason to expect a-priori preferences for leaders or for an ingroup, in this type of context.

Participants ($N = 35$) were assigned randomly to condition in a 2 (Group: ingroup, outgroup) x 2 (Role: leader, non-leader) between-participants design and

participated as part of course requirement. Participants read a scenario in which charities from Britain (ingroup) and Germany (outgroup) were trying to influence an international committee's decision in favor of their different priorities for allocation of emergency relief funds. The committee was evenly divided in its preferences. A member (non-leader) or the nominated Advocate (leader) of either the ingroup or outgroup committee discovered a highly embarrassing photo that could be used to blackmail the committee chair and covertly used it to try to influence the chair's casting vote.

Participants then completed the dependent measures that were previously used in Experiment 1 to measure *judgments* of the transgressor. In addition, to determine whether the double standard is attributable to group protection motives, participants rated the *motivation* of the transgressor to serve the group as a whole (1=*definitely not*, 5=*definitely*).

Results

Perception of Transgression

The scenario was rated as plausible and likely ($M_s = 3.37, 3.60$; $SDs = 0.73, 0.85$, respectively). As expected, the act was perceived as highly transgressive ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.42$). A comparison with the transgression rating from Experiment 1 confirmed that the transgression in Experiment 2 was perceived as significantly more serious, $t(72) = 4.25, p < .001$. Also, as expected, there were no significant effects involving group or role on the perceived seriousness of the transgression.

Judgments of Transgressor

The favorability, approval, and punitiveness ratings all showed derogation of the transgressor ($M_s = -25.97, 1.89, 4.03$, $SDs = 15.91, 1.13, 1.40$). The standardized scale ($\alpha = .73$) was analyzed using a 2 (Group) x 2 (Role) between-participants

ANOVA. This revealed no significant main effects of either the group membership or role of the transgressor, $F_s < 1.52, p_s > .22, \eta^2_s < .05$. There was a significant Group x Role interaction, $F(1,31) = 4.61, p = .04, \eta^2 = .13$, shown in Figure 2.

In line with the double standard hypothesis, the planned comparison between the ingroup leader ($M = .60, SD = .97$) and all other conditions ($M = -.17, SD = .67$) was significant, $t(31) = 2.47, p = .019$. Post hoc comparisons showed that participants were significantly more favorable towards the ingroup leader than the outgroup leader ($p < .05$), and more favorable to the ingroup leader than the non-leader ($p < .05$).

Transgressor Motivation

The transgressor was viewed as moderately group serving ($M = 3.20, SD = 1.45$). However, this perception was not affected by Role, Group or their interaction ($F_s < 0.80, p_s > .37, \eta^2_s < .026$), and the Group x Role interaction on judgments of the transgressor remained significant even when motivation was treated as a covariate, $F(1,30) = 4.14, p = .044, \eta^2 = .128$. This covariance analysis demonstrates that the extent to which the actor is perceived as acting on behalf of the group makes no difference to our effects. In addition, the lack of main effects or an interaction on motivation means it cannot mediate effects on other variables.

In sum, regardless of which group or actor transgressed, the action was viewed as transgressive and also as plausible, likely, and moderately group serving. In Experiment 2 the judgments of the transgressor were not consistent with social identity and image theory or with subjective group dynamics theory because there was no overall difference in lenience toward ingroup transgressors and no sign that leaders received more extreme judgments than members per se. Nor do the findings suggest a special status for leaders per se (cf Hollander, 1958). Instead the findings

support the specific pattern predicted by the double standard hypothesis. As in Experiment 1, though involving a significantly more serious transgression, transgressive ingroup leaders were judged less punitively than all other types of transgressor.

Discussion

The findings show that leaders who break rules may more likely than others to evade punishment. Specifically, transgressors who lead the ingroup are judged less punitively than others who commit the same transgression but who are ingroup members, outgroup members or outgroup leaders. Experiment 1 demonstrated the double standard for judgments of people who corruptly engaged in covert bribery. Experiment 2 employed a much more serious transgression and investigated a potential mediator. The double standard persisted in this severe and criminal transgression (blackmail). Moreover, the extent to which participants believed that the transgressor was motivated to act on behalf of the group did not affect their judgments of the transgressor. This finding, although a null effect, is pertinent to the possibility drawn from Hollander's (1958) idiosyncrasy credit theory, that people tolerate leaders who diverge from group norms because they believe that the leaders have somehow earned the right because of their prior commitment and dedication to the group. Although Hollander's insight remains plausible in general, there is nothing in the theory that distinguishes reactions to ingroup and outgroup leaders, and it does not appear to help to explain the present findings. This may be because transgressions, rather than merely being freely chosen expressions of divergence from a group norm, reflect breaches of consensually accepted rules.

This evidence is consistent with the idea that people are uniquely reluctant to express punitive reactions to ingroup leaders, and is consistent with evidence that

people are cautious about blowing the whistle on leaders' transgressions (cf Near & Miceli, 2011). Even though group members may sometimes engage in constructive dissent (Packer, 2009), their ingroup loyalty may mean that they balk at derogating a transgressive leader (Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001). Although the findings are not consistent with the black sheep effect, they are consistent with the idea that people may be concerned with the implications of their judgments for the way other group members will view them. For example, the black sheep effect is moderated by the presence of an ingroup audience (Marques et al., 1998), and people are aware that disloyalty may attract negative reactions from fellow group members (Abrams, Rutland, et al., 2008). Given the pivotal significance of ingroup leaders, particularly in public situations, it may be that people find it difficult to judge their leader harshly without feeling that they have behaved disloyally. This in turn may undermine their identification with their group.

It is important to note that this research highlights that transgressors do not all equally benefit (or suffer) from judgments based on ingroup bias. Simple ingroup loyalty and bias, or the desire to support a more favorable image of the ingroup than the outgroup, could be expected to result in significant ingroup vs outgroup differences in judgments of transgressors both when the transgressors were leaders and when they were ordinary members. However, we did not find that ingroup members were judged favorably. Thus, the judgments do highlight that people may be motivated to protect their own leader, resulting in a double standard. This is consistent with the idea that the potential psychological costs of accepting that one's leader is flawed might mean that people afford greater leniency towards their ingroup leaders than to others.

The present findings do not appear to reflect a presumption of innocence or greater trust in leaders per se because there was no significant main effect of Role on judgments of the transgressors in either experiment. Importantly, judgments of the transgressors were not affected by perceptions of the extent to which the transgressor's motivation was perceived to be group-serving, which tends to rule out an explanation in terms of idiosyncrasy credit. Moreover, we find no support for the possibility that judgments are driven by a perception of potential for group gain or profit because the double standard was applied both when the ingroup stood to gain (Experiment 1) and when it did not (Experiment 2). Interestingly, the double standard does not seem to be based on changed perceptions of the transgression itself -- the perceived seriousness of the transgression was not affected by the role of the transgressor in either experiment. Thus, we conclude that the double standard effect is most likely attributable to people's motivation to be loyal to their group, which is signaled by evaluations of their group leader. According to Abrams et al. (2008) ingroup leaders attract loyalty both because they are assumed to be prototypical for their group, a process of 'accrual' through group socialization (cf. Hogg, 2001; Levine & Moreland, 2004), and because their occupancy of the leadership role entitles them to redefine the group prototype, thereby creating the scope to lead the group in new directions (a process of 'conferral'). Although there is good evidence for these processes in the case of innovation credit, this interpretation of the application of a double standard needs to be tested by further research.

The present findings raise several new questions for future research. One question is how perceptions of leaders and group members might change over time. Previous evidence shows that deviants may be treated differently if they are newcomers rather than established group members (Pinto et al., 2010), and that

deviant leaders may be judged more favorably if they are new rather than ex leaders (Abrams et al., 2008). Therefore, it seems plausible that the double standard may be applied less to ex leaders and perhaps more to incoming leaders. Relatedly, it would be interesting to test whether transitions from non-transgression to transgression, or vice versa (i.e. becoming more or less virtuous), provokes different responses depending on whether the target is a leader or a member. For example, it could be that ingroup leaders are more readily forgiven their transgressions if they have a previously unblemished record, or if they subsequently compensate by behaving impeccably. The same might not be true when people judge members or outgroup leaders.

Transgression can be considered to be a very extreme form of deviance from social rules that should invite unambiguous disapproval. Consistent with that expectation we did not find a black sheep effect in responses to deviant group members (which would imply greater derogation of the ingroup transgressor than the outgroup transgressor). Yet it is all the more remarkable that responses to transgressive leaders showed the *opposite* pattern quite strikingly. This suggests that ingroup loyalty may result in different types of response to non-normative group members depending on both the extent of the deviance and the role of the deviant. When a member expresses opinion deviance other members may protect the ingroup norm by derogating the deviant. However, in the cases of either transgression or innovation, it seems that loyalty also presses people to defer when the deviant is their leader. This can reduce (Abrams et al., 2008) or even reverse (the present studies) the usual black sheep effect. These findings are consistent with the idea that people sometimes confer upon their leaders the right to define the group prototype, which makes it difficult to challenge, derogate or condemn leaders who deviate.

The findings also suggest avenues for future research. Based on pilot work and the need to construct plausible and meaningful intergroup contexts, we used scenarios that matched examples of real world transgressions. Anecdotally, such transgressions typically arise when groups are in contexts facing uncertain outcomes. It may be that people are also more likely to apply a double standard when there are increased levels of uncertainty (Hogg, 2000) or intergroup competition (Sherif, 1966), and there may be important cultural differences in willingness to tolerate transgression (Mazar & Aggarwal, 2011). There may also be important audience effects and self- and group-regulation processes that moderate the effect (cf. Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Ferrell, 2007; Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez-Taboada, 2008). The scenarios seemed meaningful to participants, and are a useful tool to manipulate the same behavior whilst varying group and role of the transgressor. Nonetheless, it would be useful to further the investigation of transgressive leadership using more minimal group paradigms, face-to-face groups, archival research, or simulated virtual reality.

These findings have implications for the way organizations, cultures, and society deal with illegal, dishonest and corrupt behavior by their leaders. We showed that the double standard arises both when transgression is moderate and when it is clearly criminal. If this phenomenon persists even when the transgression is heinous it constitutes a serious problem for groups and societies capacity to regulate themselves. This double standard may be implicated in explanations for why groups are sometimes complicit in their leaders' perpetrations of serious malpractice or recklessness (e.g. leaders of major banks leading up to the 2008 financial crisis), or even extreme acts of military atrocities, terrorism or genocide. Moreover, it is not just a case that 'power corrupts'. It also may be that members allow or tolerate corruption among leading ingroup members at the same time as apparently upholding higher

standards when judging similarly transgressive others. Thus, we may conclude that, rather than power being inherently corrupting, people may be prone to collude implicitly in the corruption of leaders by failing to condemn or regulate their transgressions.

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Figure 1. Experiment 1: Favorability towards a transgressor (briber) as a function of their group membership and role in the group.

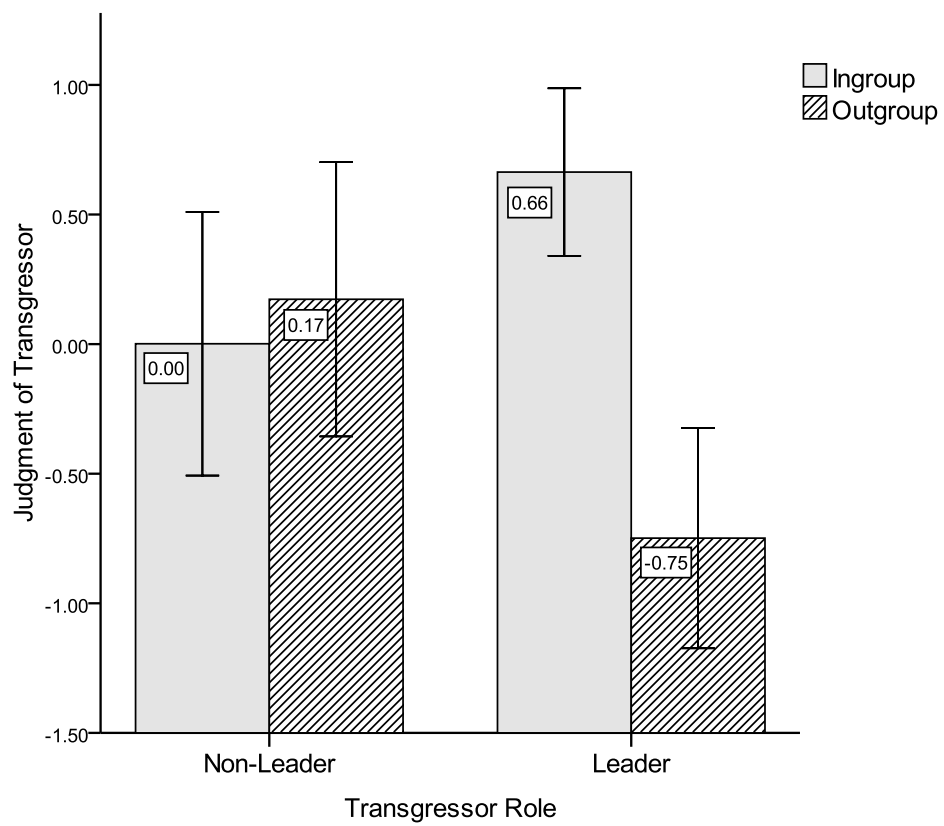


Figure 2. Experiment 2: Favorability towards a transgressor (blackmailer) as a function of their group membership and role in the group.

