When deviant leaders are punished more than non-leaders: The role of deviance severity☆

Natalia Karelaia,⁎, Steffen Keckb

a INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France
b Carnegie Mellon University, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

• We examine whether leadership status protects deviants from harsh punishments.
• We show that deviance severity moderates the effect of deviant leadership status.
• Leaders are punished less than non-leaders for minor wrongdoings.
• For major misdeeds, leaders are punished harsher than non-leaders.
• Perceived entitlement and betrayal mediate the effect of deviant leadership status.

ABSTRACT

Evaluations of deviant behavior in organizations are often biased by personal characteristics of deviants. In four studies, we investigate the conditions under which sanctioners are more lenient towards deviants who hold leadership positions as compared to individuals at lower levels of organizational hierarchies. Results supported the hypothesized interactive effect of deviance severity—which is defined by the magnitude of harm that deviant behavior inflicts on others—and deviant leadership status on recommended (Studies 1 and 2) and actual punishments (Studies 3 and 4). Leadership status appeared to protect its holders in the case of low-severity deviances, but was a liability in the case of high-severity misbehavior. Furthermore, mediation studies with measured (Study 3) and manipulated (Study 4) proposed mediators supported our hypothesis that perceived entitlement mediates the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment for low-severity deviances. For deviances of high severity, we hypothesized and found that the effect of deviant leadership status is mediated by perceived betrayal of leader-specific responsibilities. These results suggest that deviance severity and perceived rights and responsibilities associated with leadership are important determinants of punitive actions that people are willing to impose on deviant leaders.

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Introduction

Media across the globe regularly reports cases of misbehavior by business leaders such as Enron's Kenneth Lay, Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski, and WorldCom's Bernard Ebbers. Punishments for business leaders involved in these scandals are often severe. For example, in 2005, former CEO of WorldCom Bernard Ebbers received a 25-year sentence for orchestrating a record $11 billion accounting fraud (Belson, 2005). On the other side, in their daily work leaders are usually given considerable leeway in their behavior. In fact, rule-breaking, aggressive risk-taking, and lack of self-restrain are frequently perceived as marks of good leadership (Kramer, 2003). Prior research has shown that in evaluating deviant behavior, observers (e.g., those in charge of imposing punishments, public opinion, and other third-parties) are biased by personal characteristics of deviants such as, for example, their social status (Bowles & Gelfand, 2010; Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Onypchuk, 2009) or group membership (Kerr, Hymes, Anderson, & Weathers, 1995; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). Understanding such biases is important since they may lead to unfair—either too lenient or too harsh—treatment of deviants. In this paper, we study the effect of deviant leadership status—that is a position which provides its incumbent with both social status and power—on how observers evaluate misbehavior and what sanctions they are willing to impose on the deviant.

Much social–psychological research on power documented a variety of negative consequences related to the behavior of power...
incumbents. It has been shown that repeated exercise of power or a mere mental activation of this concept may by itself lead to disinhibited, situationally unconstrained and socially inappropriate behavior, less strict moral behavior, and self-serving performance evaluations (Fiske, 1993; Georgeson & Harris, 1998; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Kipnis, 1972; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010). These findings suggest that deviant behavior may abound among high-status power holders. How do observers react to such behavior? When are people more tolerant of deviances committed by leaders than by non-leaders? When (and why) are they willing to impose a harsher punishment on deviant leaders than on non-leaders? Our research seeks to answer these questions.

Power can be thought of as asymmetrical control over resources—both material and social—and other persons’ outcomes (Dépret & Fiske, 1993; Fiske, 1993; Keltner et al., 2003). In contrast, social status can be defined as “the outcome of an evaluation of attributes that produces differences in respect and prestige” (Keltner et al., 2003, 266). High social status can be due to both ascribed (e.g., gender, age, family background) and achieved characteristics (e.g., education, competence, skill, occupation). Power and status are closely related and mutually reinforcing (Magee & Galinsky, 2008) because status may determine the allocation of resources within groups (French & Raven, 1959), and individuals derive power from their membership in high social status subgroup (Domhoff, 1998; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). In fact, leadership positions in organizations and social hierarchies give their incumbents both power and high social status, as long as the individuals are perceived as legitimate occupants of these positions (Keltner et al., 2003; Messé, Kerr, & Sattler, 1982). In this research, we focus on the effect of leadership status, and by doing so we thus consider deviants who possess both power and social status.

Drawing on the research on organizational deviance (e.g., Jones, 1991; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Vardi & Wiener, 1996; Warren, 2003), role schema theory (Fiske, 1993; Fiske & Taylor, 1991) and, more specifically, leader categorization theory (Lord, 1985; Lord, Foti, & de Vader, 1984), we develop and experimentally test the hypothesis that the severity of misbehavior—which is defined by the magnitude of harm that deviant behavior inflicts on others—moderates the strength of punishment that observers impose on leaders as compared to non-leaders. We suggest that for deviances of relatively low severity leadership status protects the actor from harsh evaluations and sanctions. By contrast, when deviances are severe, this effect reverses and being a leader becomes a liability, thereby triggering stronger disapproval and punishment. We propose that this interactive effect of deviant leadership status and the severity of misbehavior is mediated by the extent to which observers perceive the leader to be entitled to certain privileges and to betray expectations that are generally held towards individuals in leadership positions.

We demonstrate the hypothesized interactive effect of deviance severity and deviant leadership status on punishment in scenario-based Studies 1 and 2. We then replicate this result in laboratory experiments and further show that the effect of leadership status on punishment is mediated by perceived entitlement for deviances of low severity and by perceived betrayal of leader-specific expectations for deviances of high severity (Studies 3 and 4).

Deviant behavior and severity

The term deviant is used to denote acts that violate significant norms (Cohen, 1966). In this paper, we define deviant behavior as behavior that is voluntary, that violates significant social norms, and in doing so, is potentially harmful to others. Thus, deviant behavior does not live up to the standards set by “hypernorms,” or globally held standards of ethical behavior (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994; Warren, 2003). As such, this definition overlaps with the definition of workplace deviance, which has been conceptualized as behavioral departures from norms of a reference group in general, or, more specifically, significant organizational norms, formal or informal, and threatens the well-being of the organization, its members, or society at large (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). The overlap is warranted because organizational norms often (although not always) reflect more general social norms (Warren, 2003). In fact, some scholars explicitly include both “shared organizational norms and expectations” and “core societal values and standards of proper conduct” to delineate the reference point against which organizational misbehavior is judged as such (Vardi & Wiener, 1996, 153; see also Vardi & Weitz, 2004). An important part to all these conceptualizations of deviant behavior is harm that such behavior inflicts on others. Because deviant acts may harm others, it can be said that they involve a moral, or ethical, issue (Velasquez & Rostankowski, 1985). Thus, our definition of deviant behavior is close to what Jones (1991) calls unethical behavior, a category in which he includes acts that are ethically unacceptable to the larger community.

Importantly, the conceptualization of deviant behavior that we adopt differs from the legal approach to deviance that considers violations of legal standards (e.g., Baucus & Baucus, 1997; Miceli & Near, 1984). Deviant behavior, as we define it, may be acceptable or not from the legal standpoint, but, importantly, it contradicts general social norms. For example, verbally abusing a co-worker, lying, taking credit for others’ work, or unfairly claiming more resources for the self may be legal or not. However, common to all these examples is that these behaviors violate significant societal norms and have the potential to harm others.

Literature on deviant behavior suggests that the magnitude of harm inflicted on victims (individuals or organizations) is a metric on which deviant behavior can be classified along the severity continuum (Jones, 1991; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Vardi & Wiener, 1996). On this metric, deviant acts that are associated with more serious negative consequence for others are considered more severe and unethical (Butterfield, Treviño, & Weaver, 2000; Fritzsche, 1988; Jones, 1991; Morris & McDonald, 1995; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; York, 1989), and the perpetrators of acts with more serious negative consequences tend to be punished more (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; see also Kahneman, Schkade, & Sunstein, 1998).

We propose that the magnitude of harm caused by a deviant act is a determining factor of whether deviant leaders are punished for the same misbehavior more than individuals not holding a leadership position. Moreover, deviant behavior of leaders within the context of social structures of organizations is especially interesting, because specific expectations of behaviors associated with leadership roles within such structures can create a reference point for judging leaders’ behavior. We suggest that such expectations can lead to differential predictions regarding how harshly leaders and non-leaders are judged for acts that defy societal norms and inflict harm—either mild or substantial—on other individuals within these social structures. We develop these ideas further below.

Role schema theory

Social cognition research postulates that the role one has in a group activates certain role schemas (Fiske, 1993), both in the role holder and observers. Role schemas reflect common descriptive and prescriptive expectations towards a person in this role, and they exert significant influence on processing social information (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Among other things, such expectations entail the rights and obligations of the incumbent of a particular social role. The ideas of role schema theory have been widely applied to the field of leadership in the form of leader categorization theory (e.g., Lord, 1985; Lord & Emrich, 2001; Lord et al., 1984). According to the leader categorization theory, members of organizations evaluate leaders with respect to the degree to which leaders act according to the common expectations concerning how prototypical leaders should behave and what characteristics they should possess. For example, leaders who are perceived as resembling the “ideal leader” are seen as more intelligent (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). Importantly, the leader role schema holds that the leader should act in a responsible and fair manner towards the status-conferring group, but also that s/he is entitled to certain privileges (Lord et al., 1984; Messick et al., 1983;
Samuelson & Allison, 1994). We suggest that these two sets of expectations affect how observers judge social norm violations—causing either mild or substantial harm—committed by individuals holding high-status leadership positions in organizations.

**Entitlement**

Cognitive role schemas of leadership entail expectations that leaders deserve more privileges than are generally given (De Cremer, 2003; De Cremer & Van Dijk, 2005; Fiske, 1996; Messé et al., 1992; Samuelson & Allison, 1994). As a consequence of such feelings of entitlement, individuals who are assigned to the role of leaders and feel that they legitimately earned the assignment of the role are more likely to violate equality norms and demand higher resources for themselves (De Cremer, 2003; De Cremer & Van Dijk, 2005).

The feeling of leader entitlement is not limited to individuals in leadership positions but also affects observers. Stouten and Tripp (2009) manipulated deviant leadership status experimentally and found that individuals felt less negative affect towards a group leader who undercontributed to a common goal than towards another undercontributing member of the group who did not hold a leadership position. The more lenient punishment of leaders than non-leaders was mediated by the perceptions that leaders were more entitled to behave selfishly than non-leaders. These findings are in line with the idea that observers may perceive deviant acts committed by individuals in leadership positions to be more normal, widespread, or even normative (Giordano, 1983). Research shows that people see a prototypical leader as more competitive, manipulative, and somewhat less generous than a prototypical non-leader (Lord et al., 1984). As a consequence, observers may see minor misbehaviors as consistent with the leader role schema and thus may be reluctant to sanction harshly deviant leaders.

Drawing on these ideas, we suggest that because of their role-specific privileges, leaders will be given more leeway with respect to less severe violations of social norms that do not cause substantial harm to group members. In contrast, individuals not holding a leadership position will not be protected by such privileges. As a consequence, low-severity deviances will be punished less when committed by leaders than non-leaders.

However, there should be limits to leader entitlement (Stouten & Tripp, 2009). In fact, the perception of leader entitlement can be a consequence of a commonly held expectation that individual outcomes affect how observers judge social norm violations—causing either mild or substantial harm—committed by individuals holding high-status leadership positions in organizations.

For deviances of low severity, perceived entitlement of high severity, leaders are punished more leniently than non-leaders, while for deviances associated with holders of leadership positions, and therefore leaders will be punished more than non-leaders for committing severe transgressions. Thus, in the case of deviances that cause minor harm to others, being a leader constitutes a protection against punitive actions. When deviances cause major harm to others, leadership status does not protect its holder anymore and becomes instead a liability. Our predictions are summarized in the following hypotheses and in Fig. 1:

**Hypothesis 1.** Deviance severity moderates the association between deviant leadership status and the extent to which observers punish the deviant, such that for deviant behavior of low severity, leaders are punished more leniently than non-leaders, while for deviances of high severity, leaders are punished harsher than non-leaders.

**Hypothesis 2.** For deviances of low severity, perceived entitlement mediates the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment.

**Hypothesis 3.** For deviances of high severity, perceived betrayal of leader-specific expectations mediates the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment.

**Study 1**

The goal of Study 1 was to establish the interactive effect of deviance severity and deviant leadership status on recommended punishment (Hypothesis 1).
Participants and design

We recruited 160 US-based adults via an online recruitment tool (Amazon Mechanical Turk\(^1\)) who completed an online survey for a nominal fee. We employed a 2 (deviant: leader vs. non-leader) × 2 (deviance severity: high vs. low) between-subject design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and completed the survey in 9 min on average. We included several comprehension questions and two instructional manipulation checks (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009) to identify participants who did not read questions carefully. As a conservative quality check, the data of the participants who failed to answer at least one comprehension question or the instructional manipulation check (13%) were excluded from further analysis. The results below are based on 139 responses (75 men and 64 women).

Method

Participants were asked to assume the role of “HR consultants” and evaluate employees of a client company. Participants first read a description of a male employee (adapted from Bowles & Gelfand, 2010). The leader scenario introduced David Rogers, “a well-regarded senior executive with a long track record of good performance.” He was said to be “the head of the sales department and in charge of over 100 employees”; his high position in the organizational hierarchy gave him “great authority to make independent decisions.” The non-leader scenario introduced Dave Rogers, “a not well-known staff assistant with little track record,” who “works in the sales department,” and “has no formal authority over other employees.” His position in the organization was described as “giving him very little authority to make independent decisions” and placing him in the lower end of the hierarchy. Thus, in this study, the manipulation of target leadership status involved elements of both power and status such as formal authority position, social respect, and proven expertise that are typically associated with leadership positions. In all conditions, the target was male.

After answering questions that tested their understanding of the scenario, participants rated target leadership status by indicating how much status (on a scale from 1 = very low status to 7 = very high status) and power (1 = very little to 7 = a lot) they thought the target had, \(\alpha = .96\). Subsequently, participants were asked to evaluate sequentially four hypothetical deviances (all of either high or low severity). The deviances were adapted from the list of workplace deviant behavior that Robinson and Bennett (1995) categorized, by resulting harm, into less severe (“being late for meetings;” “using company stamps to mail personal letters;” “making personal phone calls;” and “acting against the decision of a superior”) and more severe (“withholding important work-related information;” “sexually harassing a co-worker;” “verbally abusing a co-worker;” and “over-reporting travel expenses”). Table 1 provides full description of the eight deviance scenarios. The order in which the four transgressions were presented was randomized. For each deviance, participants rated, on a scale anchored at 1 (not at all) and 10 (extremely), how strongly the organization should punish the deviant, and this constituted our dependent variable.

Results

Manipulation check

As we intended, participants rated the leadership status of the target character significantly higher in the leader (\(M = 6.43, SD = .50\)) than in the non-leader (\(M = 1.83, SD = 1.00\)) condition, \(t(137) = −31.62, one-tailed p < .001, d = 5.51\).\(^2\)

Punishment

Table 1 displays punishment scores for all deviances. To test the interactive effect of deviant leadership status and deviance severity, we combined punishment scores over four deviances by averaging them for each participant (\(\alpha = .81\)). A 2 (severity: low vs. high) \(\times\) 2 (deviant leadership status) between-subject ANOVA of the combined punishment scores showed a significant interaction effect of deviant leadership status and severity, \(\text{F}(1,135) = 16.25, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .11\), supporting Hypothesis 1. The main effect of severity was also significant, \(\text{F}(1,135) = 78.36, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .37\), while the main effect of deviant leadership status was not, \(\text{F}(1,135) = 1.17, \text{n.s.}\). Simple effect analyses testing our specific hypotheses on the direction of the effect of leadership status showed that for deviances of low severity, recommended punishments were lower in the leader condition (averaged across four scenarios of low severity, \(M = 4.61, SD = 1.82\)) than in the non-leader condition (\(M = 5.99, SD = 1.77\)), \(\text{F}(1,135) = 12.74, one-tailed p < .001, d = −0.78\). For high-severity deviances, observers recommended stronger punishment for leaders (averaged across four scenarios of low severity, \(M = 8.09, SD = 1.06\)) than non-leaders (\(M = 7.30, SD = 1.46\)), \(\text{F}(1,135) = 4.46, one-tailed p = .018, d = 0.62\), as we hypothesized.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 supported our prediction that deviance severity moderates the relationship between deviant leadership status and punishment. Leadership status had a shielding effect for deviances of low severity, but leaders were punished more than non-leaders for deviances of high severity. However, the experimental design had an important limitation: the scenarios in the low- and high-severity conditions were not directly comparable as they involved deviant acts of different nature (e.g., “acting against the decision of a superior” vs. “over-reporting travel expenses”). Moreover, the misbehaviors we used in Study 1 were taken directly from Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) classification of workplace deviance into severe and mild. Thus, we did not directly manipulate the magnitude of harm that

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\(^1\) Paolacci, Chandle, and Ipeirotis (2010) discussed the demographic characteristics of Mechanical Turk (MT) workers and concluded that the US workers on MT are at least as representative of the US population as traditional university subject pools. Moreover, they also demonstrated that results obtained in MT do not substantially differ from results obtained in a lab at a large Midwestern US university.

\(^2\) To test hypotheses with focused directional predictions, statisticians recommend one-tailed contrasts analyses (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Hypotheses, therefore, were analyzed using one-tailed contrasts when appropriate, as noted.
on the relationship between deviant leadership status and punishment. This study was to replicate the moderating effect of deviance severity (Fragale et al., 2002; Miller, 2001; Umphress, Simmons, Folger, Ren, & Bobocel, 2013), the goal of this study was to replicate the moderating effect of deviance severity on the relationship between deviant leadership status and punishment (Hypothesis 1).

Participants and design

Two hundred thirteen US-based adults were recruited and remunerated similarly as in Study 1. The experiment was a 2 (deviant: leader vs. non-leader) × 2 (deviance severity: high vs. low) between-subject design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (see Table 1). The experiment was a 2 (deviant: leader vs. non-leader) × 2 (deviance severity: high vs. low) between-subject design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

Method

The general setup and procedure was similar to Study 1 with the exception that each participant evaluated only one deviance: taking credit for others’ work. In particular, participants read the following passage (modifications for the non-leader condition appear in brackets):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deviance</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Non-leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low severity</td>
<td>1. Mr. Rogers (Dave) was repeatedly late for meetings.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Mr. Rogers (Dave) mailed personal letters using company stamps.</td>
<td>5.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Mr. Rogers (Dave) made personal phone calls and wrote personal e-mails during his working hours.</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Mr. Rogers (Dave) acted against the decision of a superior.</td>
<td>6.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High severity</td>
<td>1. Mr. Rogers (Dave) withheld important work-related information from other employees and superiors.</td>
<td>7.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Mr. Rogers (Dave) sexually harassed a co-worker.</td>
<td>9.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Mr. Rogers (Dave) verbally abused a co-worker.</td>
<td>7.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Mr. Rogers (Dave) over-reported his travel expenses in order to receive a higher reimbursement.</td>
<td>7.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>8.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 139.

Results

As expected, participants rated the leadership status of the target character significantly higher in the leader condition (M = 6.38, SD = .97) than in the non-leader condition (M = 1.72, SD = 1.25), F(1,171) = −27.61, one-tailed p < .001, d = 4.22. Moreover, a 2 (severity) × 2 (deviant leadership status) between-subject ANOVA of perceived harm showed a significant main effect of severity, F(1,169) = 12.77, p < .001, ηp² = .07. Neither the effect of deviant leadership status nor the leadership status × severity interaction was significant, F(1,787) = .58, ns. Participants ranked the deviance as causing more harm in the high-
SD = 1.06) than the low-severity (M = 5.61, SD = 1.22) condition, t(171) = −3.57, one-tailed p < .001, d = 0.55, as we intended. Taken together, these results indicate that our manipulation was effective.

Punishment

A 2 × 2 between-subject ANOVA of punishment recommendations showed a significant main effect of severity, F(1,169) = 8.78, p < .01, ηp² = .05, and a significant leadership status × severity interaction, F(1,169) = 8.55, p < .01, ηp² = .05. The main effect of deviant leadership status was not statistically significant, F < 1. Fig. 2 displays the interactive effect of deviant leadership status and deviance severity on punishments. Simple effect analyses revealed that, as in Study 1, in the low-severity condition, punishment recommendations were stronger for Dave Rogers the follower (M = 5.87, SD = 1.01) than for Mr. Rogers the leader (M = 5.23, SD = 1.29), F(1,169) = 7.58, one-tailed p < .01, d = 0.55. In contrast, in the high-severity condition, Mr. Rogers the leader (M = 6.22, SD = 0.87) was punished more than Dave Rogers the follower (M = 5.87, SD = 1.17), although the contrast was not statistically significant, F(1,169) = 2.02, one-tailed p = .08, d = 0.34.

Discussion

Study 2 dealt with design limitations of Study 1 by directly manipulating deviance severity through the magnitude of harm inflicted on others and holding all other aspects for the deviant act constant. The results of Study 2 replicated the interactive effect of deviant leadership status and deviance severity on punishment. As in Study 1, leaders were punished less harshly than non-leaders for a deviance resulting in a minor harm. For the same deviant act that caused more significant harm to victims, we found a trend towards punishing deviant leaders more than non-leaders. However, the effect was not statistically significant, which could suggest that in this condition, the harm (i.e., a significant pay reduction of several team members) was judged to be so substantial that participants found all deviants deserving a harsh punishment.

In both Studies 1 and 2, participants judged hypothetical misbehavior rather than actual deviances; recommended punishments were purely hypothetical too, without real consequences. We addressed these limitations in Study 3. In addition, we tested the psychological mechanism behind the interactive effect of deviance severity and deviant leadership status on punishment (Hypotheses 2 and 3).

Study 3

The goal of Study 3 was to replicate the interactive effect of severity and leadership status (Hypothesis 1) in a laboratory setting in which participants observed misbehavior by others and could impose sanctions which ostensibly had real financial consequences for deviants. We also tested the psychological mechanisms behind this interaction. Specifically, we considered perceived entitlement as a mediator of the shield effect of leadership status for low-severity misbehavior (Hypothesis 2) and perceived betrayal as a mediator of the liability effect of leadership status for high-severity misdeeds (Hypothesis 3). A specific misbehavior we chose to test in this experiment was unfair allocation of resources that results in a high payoff for the deviant and low payoffs for others. Previous research suggests that when a more fair allocation can be chosen, equality is the distribution heuristic preferred by most decision makers (Allison & Messick, 1990; De Cremer, 2001; Deutsch, 1975; Harris & Joyce, 1980). Moreover, the decision was presented to participants in the context of a modified trust game (Berg, Dickhaut, & McCabe, 1995), in which an unfair allocation of resources is in addition a betrayal of commonly held expectations of trustworthiness (Bohnet & Zeckhauser, 2004; Keck & Karelaia, 2012), and such expectations are stronger for leaders than non-leaders (Lord et al., 1984).

Thus, our operationalization of deviance in this study combines the elements that have been emphasized by the literature on organizational deviance, such as self-interest and damages to others (e.g., Jones, 1991; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990; Vardi & Wiener, 1996) and in that resemble the scenario used in Study 2. As in Study 2, we manipulated deviance severity through the magnitude of harm inflicted on victims (e.g., Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Vardi & Wiener, 1996).

Participants and design

Research assistants recruited 163 participants (72 men and 91 women, aged 18 to 35 years; Mages = 23 years) at a major university in Paris. The vast majority of participants (93%) were undergraduate students. Participants were told that they had the opportunity to earn between €2 and €10; in fact, their payoff was fixed at €7. The experiment was a 2 (deviant: leader vs. non-leader) × 2 (deviance severity: high vs. low) between-subject design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and completed the experiment in approximately 35 min. The experiment was fully computer-mediated. Participants were told that they would interact with three other participants who were supposed to work with each other in a team. In fact, the behavior of all team members was pre-programmed and all participants completed the study individually (for a similar procedure, see De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2002, 2004).

Method

Participants were assigned to isolated individual cubicles equipped with a computer. All instructions were provided on the computer screens. The experiment was programmed in z-tree software (Fischbacher, 1999). Participants were informed that they were part of a group of four who were going to complete the experiment together. They were told that one person would be randomly selected for the role of “team observer,” while the other three would form a team to perform further tasks together. Unbeknown to them, all participants were assigned to the “team observer” role. They were told that their task would be to observe the team and then evaluate the team members. Participants were informed that they would receive a fixed compensation of €7 as observers, whereas the compensation of the three team members would depend on their performance in subsequent tasks.

In the leader condition, all three team members ostensibly completed a leadership test that was supposed to assess their leadership skills. After that, participants were given “feedback” on the team members’ leadership scores. They were informed that the team member with the highest score was assigned to the role of “team leader,” and the other two members to the role of “workers.” In the non-leader condition, participants were told instead that for the next five minutes the team members would be getting familiar with the software required...
for their teamwork. In the leader condition, the team members were referred to as Worker 1, Worker 2, and Team Leader for the rest of the study, whereas in the non-leader condition team members were referred to as Team Members 1, 2, and 3. After this role manipulation, participants answered a few comprehension questions concerning the assignment of roles within the group (see De Cremer & Van Dijk, 2005; Stouten & Tripp, 2009, for a similar procedure). As a manipulation check, participants in the leader condition were asked which player was assigned to the role of team leader. All participants remembered it correctly.

To strengthen the leader manipulation, participants were informed next that the team would complete the “Lost at Sea Survival” task (Nemiroff & Pasmore, 1975). In this task, each team member supposedly had to rank five items according to their importance for survival on a life raft drifting in the ocean. In the leader condition, Team Leader ostensibly received the rankings from Worker 1 and Worker 2 and made a final decision that would count as the team’s solution to this task. In the non-leader conditions, the team’s solution was said to be automatically computed as the average of the three individual rankings. After a brief waiting period, participants received feedback about the team performance that in all conditions was described as excellent.

Participants were then informed that the team was going to perform another task that would determine final compensation for each team member. The task was a modified trust game (Berg et al., 1995), which has been successfully used in previous research on reactions to social norm violations (e.g., Bohnet & Zeckhauser, 2004; Haselhuhn, Schweitzer, & Wood, 2010; Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006). Players in this game made their decisions sequentially. First, Worker 1 (Team Member 1) had to decide either to end the game—and thereby ensure a payoff of €4 for everyone—or to continue. If Team Member 1 (Worker 1) decided to continue, Worker 2 (Team Member 2) faced the same decision. If both team members decided to continue, Team Leader (Team Member 3) had to make a decision that would determine financial payoffs for all three players. S/he could choose between: (a) an equal allocation: €5 for everyone; (b) an allocation improving his/her own financial payoff and somewhat harming the other two players: €6 for Team Leader (Team Member 3) and €3.50 for other two team members; and (c) a highly unfair allocation which increased his/her financial payoff but severely harmed the interests of the other two players: €8 for Team Leader (Team Member 3) and €0.20 for other two team members. In all conditions, participants were informed that Workers 1 and 2 (Team Members 1 and 2) had chosen to continue the game. In the low-severity conditions, participants were told that Team Leader (Team Member 3) had chosen the mildly severe alternative (b). In the high-severity condition, Team Leader (Team Member 3) was said to have chosen alternative (c) that seriously damaged the payoffs of others.

Thus, the final decision maker in the team had the possibility to choose a fair allocation of resources and by doing so did not violate the equality norm of distributive fairness (e.g., Allison & Messick, 1990; De Cremer, 2001; Deutsch, 1975) and the expectations of trustworthiness (Bohnèt & Zeckhauser, 2004; Keck & Karelaia, 2012). Thus, while the choice of an unfair alternative was within the rule of the game, it represents a violation of social norms and expectations, which makes it suitable to draw conclusions on deviant behavior, as we define it.

Participants were next informed about the team members’ decisions and then given a possibility to allocate “misbehavior points” to the team members. Each misbehavior point would lower the final payoff of that team member by 10 cents. Final payoffs could not be lower than zero. The number of points allocated to the target person (Team Leader or Team Member 3) was our dependent variable that measured the extent to which participants punished the target person for his or her decision. To measure perceived betrayal, we asked participants to evaluate the extent to which they considered the deviant behavior as a betrayal of the team on a four-item scale (i.e., “Team Leader betrayed the team,” “Team Leader let the team down,” “Team Leader disappointed the team,” and “Team Leader was disloyal to the team,” $\alpha = .92$) anchored at 1 (completely disagree) and 7 (completely agree). Perceived entitlement was measured as the extent to which participants agreed with three statements suggesting that the target person was entitled to his/her behavior (i.e., “Team Leader deserves to receive a payoff of €6 [€8].” “It was OK for Team Leader to claim a payoff of €6 [€8] for himself/herself,” and “The decision of Team Leader was appropriate in this situation,” scale from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree, $\alpha = .84$).

Results
Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables appear in Table 2.

Punishment
To test our prediction that deviance severity interacts with deviant leadership status when predicting punitive actions (i.e., misbehavior points allocated to deviants), we conducted a 2 (severity) $\times$ 2 (deviant leadership status) between-subject ANOVA with the number of misbehavior points that participants allocated to the deviant as the dependent variable and severity, deviant leadership status, and their interaction as predictors. The results showed a significant main effect of severity, $F(1,159) = 27.69$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. The main effect of deviant leadership status was non-significant, $F < 1$. In line with Hypothesis 1, we found a significant interaction between severity and deviant leadership status, $F(1,159) = 8.51$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Fig. 3 is a graph of this interaction.

To test our specific directional hypothesis regarding the effect of leadership status on punishment, we conducted simple effect analyses. These analyses showed that for deviances of high severity, leaders ($M = 43.51$, $SD = 21.34$) were punished harsher than non-leaders ($M = 31.27$, $SD = 29.52$), $F(1,159) = 6.57$, one-tailed $p < .01$, $d = .48$, as we predicted. For deviances of low severity, leaders ($M = 15.96$, $SD = 15.00$) were punished less harshly than non-leaders ($M = 23.38$, $SD = 17.42$), as predicted, although the effect was not statistically significant, $F(1,159) = 2.43$, one-tailed $p = .06$, $d = -.46$.

Mediation analyses
We hypothesized that the effect of deviant leadership status was mediated through either perceived entitlement or betrayal—depending on deviance severity. To test this hypothesis, we conducted moderated mediation (e.g., Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005) analyses that are appropriate for models where the strength of mediation (i.e., by entitlement and betrayal in our case) is conditional on some moderators (i.e., deviance severity in our case) (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Using the procedures recommended by Preacher et al. (2007) and Edwards and Lambert (2007), we first conducted regression analyses to test whether the indirect effects of deviant leadership status on punishment through perceived entitlement and betrayal were significant and then applied a
Regression analyses predicting punishment and hypothesized mediators (Study 3). Fig. 3. Mean punishment (number of “misbehavior points”) (Study 3). Note: N = 163.

bootstrapping technique (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) to understand whether these indirect effects were moderated by deviance severity.

Table 3 shows the results of the regression analyses according to the dependent variable of interest. Step 1 was a regression model predicting punishment (i.e., the dependent variable) from deviant leadership status (i.e., the independent variable), severity (i.e., the moderator), and their interaction. At Step 2, we regressed perceived entitlement (i.e., the first mediator) on deviant leadership status (i.e., the independent variable), severity (i.e., the moderator), and their interaction. Step 3 was an analogous model predicting perceived betrayal (i.e., the second mediator). Finally, at Step 4 we regressed punishment (i.e., the dependent variable) on deviant leadership status (i.e., the independent variable), severity (i.e., the moderator), their interaction, and perceived entitlement and betrayal (i.e., the two mediators).

These results revealed that the deviant leadership status × severity interaction significantly predicted perceived entitlement (Step 2) and betrayal (Step 3). The interaction was significant because perceived entitlement was higher for leaders (M = 4.04, SD = 1.43) than non-leaders (M = 3.05, SD = 1.39) for deviances of low severity, F(1,159) = 11.24, one-tailed p < .001, d = 0.71, but similarly low for leaders (M = 2.38, SD = 1.54) and non-leaders (M = 2.48, SD = 0.92) for deviances of high severity, F(1,159) < 1. As for perceived betrayal, it was higher for leaders (M = 6.10, SD = 1.22) than non-leaders (M = 5.19, SD = 1.36) for deviances of high severity, F(1,159) = 7.05, one-tailed p < .01, d = 0.71. For deviances of low severity, perceived betrayal was lower for both leaders (M = 3.30, SD = 1.58) and non-leaders (M = 4.14, SD = 1.87), although the scores of perceived betrayal were higher for non-leaders than leaders, F(1,159) = 6.21, one-tailed p < .01, d = 0.49.

Furthermore, regression analyses showed that perceived entitlement and betrayal significantly predicted punishment (Step 4), and the deviant leadership status × severity interaction became non-significant when the mediators were added to the model predicting punishment (i.e., Step 4 compared to Step 1). These results suggest that perceived betrayal and entitlement mediated the relationship between the deviant leadership status × severity interaction and punishment.

To test whether the mediation was conditional on deviance severity, we next assessed the size of the indirect effect of the deviant leadership status on punishment through perceived betrayal and entitlement in the low- and high-severity conditions. We used bootstrap procedures to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) based on 5000 random samples with replacement from the full sample (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). This method has been shown to produce reliable results in multiple-mediator models (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We specifically hypothesized that perceived entitlement mediates the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment for low-severity misbehavior, while for high-severity deviant acts, the effect is mediated by perceived betrayal. In the high-severity condition, the bootstrapping results of the 95% bias-corrected CIs for indirect effects of deviant leadership status showed a significant (p = .04) positive indirect effect through betrayal (1.46; 12.28), but a non-significant indirect effect through entitlement (p = .74, CI = [−3.38; 6.35]), as we predicted. In the low-severity condition, the indirect effect of leadership status through perceived entitlement was significant (p = .02, CI: [−6.28, −1.05]), in line with our prediction; while the indirect effect through perceived betrayal was not (p = .66, CI: [−9.92; −6.01]). These results support our moderated mediation hypothesis by showing that the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment is mediated by perceived betrayal for deviances of high severity and by perceived entitlement for deviances of low severity.

Discussion

The experimental results of Study 3 showed that stronger punishment of deviant leaders than non-leaders committing a major deviance and thus causing considerable harm to team members was mediated by the extent to which observers perceived misbehavior to constitute a betrayal of team expectations. In contrast, for minor deviances resulting in less significant harm to others, the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment was mediated by perceived entitlement of the deviant to the behavior in question. However, our results suggest that in the low-severity condition, perceived betrayal might have also played a role in explaining punishment (i.e., perceived betrayal was higher for non-leaders than leaders, and although not significant, the CI for the indirect effect of deviant leadership status through perceived betrayal excluded zero). Given that we measured perceived entitlement and perceived betrayal through entitlement was significantly predicted perceived entitlement (Step 2) and betrayal (Step 3). The interaction was significant because perceived entitlement was higher for leaders (M = 4.04, SD = 1.43) than non-leaders (M = 3.05, SD = 1.39) for deviances of low severity, F(1,159) = 11.24, one-tailed p < .001, d = 0.71, but similarly low for leaders (M = 2.38, SD = 1.54) and non-leaders (M = 2.48, SD = 0.92) for deviances of high severity, F(1,159) < 1. As for perceived betrayal, it was higher for leaders (M = 6.10, SD = 1.22) than non-leaders (M = 5.19, SD = 1.36) for deviances of high severity, F(1,159) = 7.05, one-tailed p < .01, d = 0.71. For deviances of low severity, perceived betrayal was lower for both leaders (M = 3.30, SD = 1.58) and non-leaders (M = 4.14, SD = 1.87), although the scores of perceived betrayal were higher for non-leaders than leaders, F(1,159) = 6.21, one-tailed p < .01, d = 0.49.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>Step 4</th>
</tr>
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<td>DV = punishment</td>
<td>DV = perceived entitlement</td>
<td>DV = perceived betrayal</td>
<td>DV = punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviant leadership status</td>
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<td>0.34 (3.35)***</td>
<td>−0.23 (−2.49)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe deviance</td>
<td>0.17 (1.66)</td>
<td>−0.19 (−1.90)</td>
<td>0.28 (3.11)**</td>
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<td>Deviant leadership status × Severe deviance</td>
<td>0.36 (2.92)**</td>
<td>−0.32 (−2.60)*</td>
<td>0.41 (3.60)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived entitlement</td>
<td>0.31 (3.13)***</td>
<td>0.42 (3.92)***</td>
<td>0.42 (3.92)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived betrayal</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R²</td>
<td>F(3,159) = 12.22</td>
<td>F(3,159) = 25.76</td>
<td>F(3,159) = 12.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison to Step 1: ΔR²

Notes: N = 163. Standardized beta coefficients; t-statistics in parentheses.

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⁎⁎⁎ p < .001.

⁎⁎ p < .01.

⁎ p < .05.
betrayal one after another, it might be that the two measures “contami-
nated” each other and produced a halo effect. To address this limitation and to further test the conditional mediation effects, we conducted an-
other study, in which we directly manipulated the proposed mediators, i.e., perceived entitlement for deviances of low severity and perceived betrayal for high-severity deviances.

In addition, while our manipulation of severity through the magni-

tude of harm to others was straightforward in Study 3, we did not test whether participants indeed thought that the severe deviance resulted in a more significant harm than the deviance that we intended to be seen as mild. We thus pre-tested the experimental manipulation in Study 4. Finally, our manipulation of high-severity
deviance confounded harm to the victim (i.e., more harm to others) and perpetrator selfishness (i.e., more payoff to self), and this might have affected the punishment results by, for instance, prompting par-
ticipants to use a “percentage of payoff” heuristic while imposing punishment. We therefore modified the experimental setting in Study 4 to keep the payoff to self constant across different conditions.

Study 4

The goal of Study 4 was to provide additional evidence that the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment is mediated by perceived entitlement when the deviant engages in transgressions of low severity and that perceived betrayal mediates the effect of deviant leadership status when deviances are seen as resulting in major harms to others. With this objective, we conducted a laboratory experiment, similar to Study 3, where we directly manipulated the hypothesized mediators, following the recommendations by Bullock, Green, and Ha (2010). Our reasoning was that if for low-severity transgressions the effect of deviant leadership status operates through perceived entitlement, manipulating entitlement to be perceived as low should eliminate the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment. Similarly, if for high-severity transgressions the effect of deviant leadership status is mediated by perceived betrayal of leader-specific expectations, then manipulating betrayal to be perceived as low in a given situation should eliminate the effect of deviant leadership status.

In addition, because observers tend to attribute greater intention-

al-ity to the actions of high-status deviants than deviants of low status, and this, in part, explains why high-status deviants are punished harsher (Fragale et al., 2009), in Study 4, we also measured and con-
trolled in our analyses for perceived intentionality.

Participants and design

Two hundred sixty-nine participants (170 women and 99 men, aged 18 to 38 years; M_age = 22.51 years) were recruited and remunerated similarly as in Study 3. The experiment had a 2 (deviant: leader vs. non-leader) × 2 (deviance severity: high vs. low) × 2 (manipulated mediator vs. control) between-subject design. Participants were ran-
domly assigned to one of the eight conditions. As Study 3, this experi-
ment was fully computer-mediated.

Method

The procedure and the main task were the same as in Study 3, except that the payoffs and the composition of the group were modified as explained below. Participants were told that ostensibly three other par-
ticipants were assigned to the roles of team leader and workers, and that participants themselves were assigned to the role of observers. While in Study 3 in the non-leader condition all three team members were of equal status, in this experiment, the composition of the team was kept constant in all experimental conditions (i.e., two workers and one leader). Only deviant leadership status (leader vs. non-leader) was varied between conditions. This design allowed us to better isolate the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment. As in Study 3, first two players (two workers in the leader condition; one worker and the leader in the non-leader condition) presumably had to make their choice between ending the game (that would result in this experiment in a pay-
off of £5 for the decision maker and £1 for two other players) and passing decision to the next player. Participants were informed that both players chose to pass. The last decision maker (the leader in the leader condition; a worker in the non-leader condition) had a choice between the outcome that would give £5.5 to each of the three players and an unequal out-
come where the decision maker him/herself would get £7, while the payoff of two other players would fall below £5.5, down to £4.8 in the low-severity condition and £0.5 in the high-severity condition. The last decision maker, participants were told, chose the unequal alternative. After observing these decisions, participants were given a possibility to punish the wrongdoer by subtracting “misbehavior points” from his/her payoff, and this measure constituted our dependent variable. Thus, as in Study 3, the wrongdoing to be evaluated by participants was a viola-
tion of the equality norm of distributive fairness.

Leadership status of the wrongdoer was manipulated as in Study 3. As in Study 3, after the leader/non-leader role manipulation (and before describing the wrongdoing), we checked whether participants correctly understood the role assignment. All participants in the leader condition answered correctly the wrongdoer was assigned to the role of team leader. As described above and similar to Study 3, severity was manipulated by varying the magnitude of harm that the wrongdoer’s action inflicted on other team members’ well-being. In addition, we controlled for the benefit that the wrongdoer was get-
ting for him/herself. As indicated above, the amount that the wrong-
doer presumably received him/herself as a consequence of his/her choice was kept fixed at £7 in all conditions.

The proposed mediators were manipulated in the following way. In the low-severity condition, our goal was to reduce the perception that the team leader was more entitled to certain privileges than other team members. With this objective, when informing partici-
ants of who was assigned to which role within the team, we added the following paragraph:

“Note that these roles only determine the particular tasks the group members are going to perform. They do not entail any other rights or privileges.”

In the high-severity condition, our objective was to reduce the perception that the team leader had additional responsibilities than any other team member and thus to reduce the perception that the team leader would be betraying the team by violating the responsibil-
ities implicitly associated with the role of leader (Alvarez, 1968; Giordano, 1983; Samuelson & Messick, 1995). We thus added the fol-
lowing paragraph:

“Note that these roles only determine the particular tasks the group members are going to perform. They do not entail any other responsibilities or obligations.”

As a manipulation check, we assessed the extent to which partici-
ants thought the deviant (1) betrayed team expectations (“violated his/her responsibilities towards the team”), and (2) was entitled to do what s/he did (“it was legitimate for him/her to chose that alternative,” for a similar measure, see De Cremer & Van Dijk, 2005), on a scale an-
chored at 1 (completely disagree) and 7 (completely agree). Finally, to measure perceived intentionality, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they thought the wrongdoer’s choice was intentional, on a scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely).

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables are shown in Table 4.
Manipulation checks

Severity. We conducted a pre-test of our severity manipulation in a separate online study. Fifty-two participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk and were randomly assigned to either low- or high-severity condition. They read a detailed description of the trust game, with the harm to others varying by condition. The game was described in the same way as it was in the main study. The instructions made no references to leadership status differences between the three players and referred to all of them as team members. Participants indicated to what extent they agreed that by choosing the unequal alternative, the last decision maker caused “a lot of” and “a very substantial” harm to two other players, α = .79. The scale was anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). Confirming the suitability of our manipulation, participants rated the behavior of the decision maker as causing significantly more harm in the high-severity condition (M = 4.94, SD = 1.40) than in the low-severity condition (M = 3.70, SD = 1.56); r(50) = 3.02, one-tailed p = .01, d = 0.85.

Entitlement and betrayal. To assess whether our manipulations of proposed mediators were successful, we compared (separately) perceived entitlement and perceived betrayal between the control condition and the condition in which each mediator was manipulated. As noted above, the purpose of our manipulation was (1) to bring perceived entitlement of leaders to the level of non-leaders in the low-severity condition, and (2) to bring perceived betrayal of leaders to the level of non-leaders in the high-severity condition. Thus, a successful manipulation of our mediators would require that the differences in perceived entitlement (low-severity condition) and perceived betrayal (high-severity condition) between deviant leaders and non-leaders are observed in the control condition, but not in the condition in which we manipulated a specific mediator. To understand whether it was the case, we compared perceived entitlement and betrayal scores between relevant conditions. Table 5 shows mean perceived entitlement and betrayal by condition.

For deviances of low severity, perceived entitlement was higher for leaders (M = 4.58, SD = 2.19) than non-leaders (M = 3.44, SD = 1.89) in the control condition, F(1,261) = 5.18, one-tailed p = .01, d = .57, but not in the manipulated mediator condition in which perceived entitlement was similar for leaders (M = 3.58, SD = 2.17) and non-leaders (M = 3.50, SD = 1.89), F(1,261) < 1. Similarly, for deviances of high severity, perceived betrayal was higher for leaders (M = 5.94, SD = 1.09) than non-leaders (M = 5.09, SD = 2.14) in the control condition, F(1,261) = 3.42, one-tailed p = .03, d = .52, but not in the manipulated mediator condition in which perceived betrayal was similar for leaders (M = 5.20, SD = 2.01) and non-leaders (M = 5.41, SD = 1.86), F(1,261) < 1. Taken together, these results suggest that our manipulation of the hypothesized mediators was successful.

As an additional manipulation check, we verified that our experimental interventions aimed to affect a specific mediator affected only this mediator and no other potential mediator (Bullock et al., 2010). Specifically, we analyzed whether (1) our manipulation of entitlement in the low-severity condition inadvertently affected the difference in perceived betrayal between leaders and non-leaders, and (2) our manipulation of betrayal in the high-severity condition inadvertently affected the difference in perceived entitlement of leaders and non-leaders. The results showed (Table 5) that in the low-severity condition, there was no significant difference between perceived betrayal of leaders and non-leaders, neither in the control (M = 4.12, SD = 2.03 vs. M = 4.83, SD = 2.05), F(1,261) = 2.25, one-tailed p = .07, nor in the manipulated mediator condition (M = 5.00, SD = 1.82 vs. M = 4.75, SD = 2.14), F(1,261) < 1. Similarly, in the high-severity condition, the difference in perceived entitlement of leaders and non-leaders was significant in neither the control condition (M = 3.22, SD = 1.99 vs. M = 3.21, SD = 1.71), F(1,261) < 1, nor the manipulated mediator condition (M = 3.57, SD = 2.33 vs. M = 3.26, SD = 2.14), F(1,261) < 1. These results further indicate that the manipulation of mediators worked as intended.

Intentionality. We conducted a 2 (deviance severity) × 2 (deviant leadership status) × 2 (manipulated mediators vs. control) ANOVA with perceived intentionality as dependent variable to verify that our manipulation of perceived entitlement and betrayal did not inadvertently affect perceived intentionality, another potential mediator. The results showed that neither main effect of manipulated mediators (F(1,261) < 1) nor any interaction involving it (Fs(1,261) < 1) was significant in predicting intentionality perceptions. No other predictor was significant either (Fs(1,261) < 3.45, p > .06). Moreover, all simple effects of manipulated mediators (for all four combinations of deviant leadership status and severity) were not significant, Fs(1,261) < 1, thereby suggesting that intentionality perceptions were not affected by the manipulation of our proposed mediators.

Punishment

A 2 (deviance severity) × 2 (deviant leadership status) × 2 (manipulated mediators vs. control) ANOVA of punishment with perceived intentionality as covariate revealed a significant three-way interaction between severity, deviant leadership status, and the betrayal/entitlement manipulation, F(1,260) = 8.04, p < .01, ηp² = .03. There was also a significant main effect of deviance severity, F(1,260) = 29.11, p < .001, ηp² = .10, and perceived intentionality, F(1,260) = 6.50, p = .01, ηp² = .02, but no main effect of leadership status, F < 1. None of the two-way interactions was significant, all Fs ≤ 1.23.

To understand better the three-way interaction between severity, deviant leadership status, and the betrayal/entitlement manipulation, we conducted follow-up analyses of conditional interaction effects between deviance severity and deviant leadership status. These results showed that the severity × deviant leadership status interaction was significant in the control conditions, F(1,260) = 7.66, p < .01, ηp² = .04, but not in the conditions in which we manipulated the proposed mediators, F(1,260) = 1.54, ns, supporting our predictions.

We specifically predicted that leaders and non-leaders would receive differential punishment in the control conditions, but not in the conditions in which we manipulated the proposed mediators. We conducted further planned contrast analyses to elucidate the
effect of manipulating the mediators. The results revealed that, as Fig. 4 shows, for deviations of low severity, leaders (M = 15.94, SD = 24.53) were punished less than non-leaders (M = 27.44, SD = 28.02) in the control condition, F(1,260) = 4.15, one-tailed p = .02, d = −0.44, but not in the condition in which we manipulated the entitlement associated with the leadership role to be low (M = 26.21, SD = 24.20 and M = 20.28, SD = 15.50, respectively), F(1,260) = 1.12, ns. This result supports our hypothesis that perceived entitlement is a mechanism through which deviant leadership status affects punishment for low-severity deviations. For deviations of high severity, leaders (M = 45.31, SD = 22.21) were punished more than non-leaders (M = 33.85, SD = 18.29) in the control condition, F(1,260) = 3.52, one-tailed p = .03, d = 0.57, but not in the condition in which we manipulated the degree of responsibilities associated with the leadership role to be low (M = 34.27, SD = 25.54 and M = 36.15, SD = 24.80, respectively), F < 1. Thus, our hypothesis that perceived betrayal of leader-specific responsibilities mediates the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment for high-severity deviations was also supported.

Discussion

The results of Study 4 supported our conditional mediation hypotheses. We found that leaders received more lenient punishments than non-leaders for low-severity deviations, but only when the perception of leader-specific entitlement was not experimentally manipulated to be low. Similarly, leaders were punished harsher than non-leaders for high-severity deviations, but the difference disappeared when we manipulated the betrayal of leader-specific responsibilities to be perceived as low. These results suggest that perceived entitlement mediates the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment for minor misdeeds (Hypothesis 2) and that perceived betrayal mediates the effect of leadership status on punishment for major deviations (Hypothesis 3).

General discussion

Corporate and political scandals with leaders abusing of their positions to benefit themselves at the expense of others and more generally violating significant social norms and thereby causing harm to others are abound in the press. While deviant leaders sometimes receive harsh sanctions for their misbehavior, they often appear to be immune to punishment. One may begin to question: Does leadership status protect its holders or is it a liability for deviants?

We presented the results of four experiments designed to understand when observers punish deviant leaders more than non-leaders and what explains these effects. We proposed that deviance severity—which we defined, drawing on previous research (Jones, 1991; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Vardi & Wiener, 1996), as the magnitude of harm that deviant behavior inflicts on others—largely determines whether leadership status is a shield or a liability. Across the four studies, the results showed that observers tend to punish leaders less than non-leaders for mild acts of deviance, but impose harsher sanctions on leaders than non-leaders when they engage in severe misbehavior that causes substantial harm to others. As for the mechanism that explains this shield/liability effect of leadership status, we proposed and found that in the case of low-severity deviations, the perception that leaders are entitled to certain privileges mediates the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment. In contrast, severe deviations shift the attention of observers to leader-specific responsibilities. Perceived betrayal, or violation, of expectations regarding how a leader should behave (i.e., being fair, trustworthy, caring, unselfish, etc., Lord et al., 1984) explains why leaders are punished harsher than non-leaders for high-severity deviations.

Our findings contribute to the growing literature on observer reactions to deviant behavior inflicting harm on others (for a review, see Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). By highlighting the joint effect of deviant leadership status and deviance severity, this research helps to bridge seemingly contradictory findings. On the one hand, past research suggests that for the same transgression, leaders and in general actors of a relatively higher status are evaluated more leniently than low-status actors (Bowles & Gelfand, 2010; Schur, 1983; Stouten & Tripp, 2009; Thomson & Zingraff, 1981). On the other hand, other studies have reported instead that high-status deviants are judged harsher (e.g., Fragale et al., 2009). Our findings suggest that deviance severity—as defined by the magnitude of harm inflicted on others—should be taken into account when predicting the effect of deviant leadership status on punishments imposed on the deviant. For example, while previous research has showed that deviants holding a position superior than the victim of the wrongdoing are considered more responsible and evaluated harsher (Hamilton & Sanders, 1981), our results suggest that this is likely to be so only when the harm resulting from the wrongdoing is major, as we found in Studies 3 and 4, in which victims were holding lower positions than the deviant.

This research also advances our knowledge about the mechanisms underlying the effect of deviant leadership status on punishment. First, we showed that perceived entitlement explains a greater leniency towards leaders (Stouten & Tripp, 2009), but only when deviations are mild. Second, leadership theories suggest that to be perceived as legitimate and effective, leaders have to fulfill the expectations of their followers (Gouldner, 1960; Hollandier, 1992; Hollander & Julian, 1969; Lord, 1985). Our results contribute to the leadership literature by suggesting that followers may perceive a highly severe violation of social norms committed by a leader as a strong betrayal of their expectations and as a result punish them more. It thus may be problematic for the leader to maintain the ability to influence followers after committing a severe deviant act.

This research is subject to several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, our objective was to understand how observers react to deviances committed by leaders as compared with non-leaders, while we defined and manipulated deviance severity through harm that the deviant act inflicted on victims. It remains unclear whether our results also apply to victims themselves, as opposed to third-party observers. It would thus be illuminating to understand whether our result on the interaction between deviant leadership status and deviance severity holds when punishment is administered by the actual victims of transgressions.

Second, further studies can directly address the question how followers react to deviances committed by leaders and whether they are willing to continue endorsing deviant leaders. From the symbolic interactionism perspective (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959), which emphasizes the importance of social interactions for the development of
identity and meaning in general, an individual only becomes a leader when followers accept him/her as such and “grant” this identity to the leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009). When a leader violates significant social norms and in doing so causes harm to others, s/he may reduce the chances that followers reciprocate his/her claims for a leader identity. While our results suggest that it might be easier for deviant leaders to continue being endorsed by followers when deviances are mild than severe, further laboratory and field studies should explore whether mild deviant behavior may even be expected from leaders, given that leadership positions are seen as providing their incumbents with additional privileges. If this is the case, committing a minor transgression may have null effect for leaders’ reputation, or, ironically, even reinforce the recognition by others of their “leader qualities.” Future studies exploring these issues might provide further insights on the role of deviance severity and leader-specific expectations in predicting the consequences of deviant behavior for leaders.

Third, similar to previous research on third-party reactions to deviances (e.g., Fragale et al., 2009; Umphress et al., 2013), our manipulation of observer status might have exerted some degree of experimental demand (Orne, 1962) inducing participants to evaluate the deviance harsher (or more leniently). In the first two studies, we asked participants to assume the role of “HR consultants” (e.g., Bowles & Gelfand, 2010), and this might have put participants in a superior position vis-à-vis the transgressor and, consequently, made them more likely to recommend a punitive action. In Studies 3 and 4, participants were asked to assume the role of “team observers” and evaluate the behavior of other fellow participants. This experimental manipulation might have also caused participants to feel superior with respect to the participants ostensibly assigned to the roles of team members. It is also possible that the experimental procedure caused participants to feel a part of the group and thus overall reduce their willingness to punish deviant in-group members. These considerations suggest that our results should be interpreted with caution. However, it seems unlikely that experimental demand can explain the interactive effect between deviant leadership status and deviance severity that we found across the four studies. Moreover, between-subject design, minimal contact between participants and the experimenter, and the fact that participants did not express any awareness of the hypotheses in the post-experimental debrief session increase our confidence in the validity of our results (Orne, 1969; Weber & Cook, 1972).

Fourth, while we hypothesized and generally found that for high-severity deviances leaders were punished more than non-leaders, there might be a ceiling effect whereby for outrageous deviances causing extreme harm to victims leaders and non-leaders are similarly harshly punished. In our Study 2, leaders were punished only slightly more than non-leaders for a deviance of high severity (i.e., harm consisting in a significant pay reduction of several team members). The fact that the difference was not statistically significant may suggest that participants saw the harm as extremely severe. Future studies should further examine the boundary conditions for the effects that we documented and in particular test whether the effect of leadership status on punishment disappears for transgressions resulting in harms universally judged as extreme (e.g., causing a human death).

Fifth, the generalizability of our results to different cultures may be limited. As our results show, where we draw the line between what is punishable and what is not, depends not only on whether a leader engages in a severe or a mild deviant behavior, but also on whether the leader is seen as entitled to certain privileges and as having specific responsibilities associated with his/her position. Cross-cultural research suggests, however, that implicit leadership theories—that is, cognitive categories used to distinguish leaders from non-leaders (Lord et al., 1984)—may vary from culture to culture (Lord & Maher, 1991). Our results are based on the data collected in France and USA, where, as House et al. (1999) suggest, people tend to “glorify” the concept of leadership. Further research should explore whether these results also hold in cultures where leader role schemas emphasize, for example, humbleness and modesty, or where egalitarianism plays a special role, or yet where leaders are expected to be self-centered. Provided how widespread deviant behavior among leaders is, future research on these issues seems warranted.

Finally, we believe that this research has important practical implications. Deviant and in general unethical behavior in organizations causes a lot of material loss and psychological distress. One way to diminish deviant behavior would be to impose formal sanctions on deviants. Another mechanism would involve social disapproval and condemnation of acts that violate societal rules (Graumann & Green, 1980). Our results imply that the extent to which anticipated social disapproval alone might prevent potential deviants from engaging in questionable behavior depends on deviance severity and deviant leadership status. We found that observers tend to downplay deviances that result only in minor harm to others when these are committed by leaders. It implies that ex-post social disapproval alone may not be sufficient to reduce the instances of minor deviances committed by leaders. Other mechanisms such as, for example, holding leaders accountable (De Cremer, 2003; Tetlock, 1992) should thus be considered in order to prevent leaders from setting “bad precedents.”

References


