

**POWER, MORAL CLARITY, AND PUNISHMENT IN THE WORKPLACE**

**Scott S. Wiltermuth**

**University of Southern California**

**Francis J. Flynn**

**Stanford University**

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ABSTRACT

We propose that power increases how severely people punish a transgressor. Further, we argue that this greater severity stems from an increased sense of moral clarity instilled by the psychological experience of power. We investigate the linkages among power, moral clarity, and punishment across multiple studies. Individuals with an increased sense of power advocated more severe punishments for transgressors than did those with a diminished sense of power. Further, moral clarity mediated the link between power and severity of punishment. We discuss the implications of these findings for managers in organizations and researchers interested in punitive reactions to moral transgressions.

### **Power, Moral Clarity, and Punishment in the Workplace**

Ethical standards of professional conduct often are implicit, or tacitly held (Turiel, 2002; Haidt, 2001; Flynn & Wiltermuth, 2010), making it difficult for members of organizations to know which types of behavior are permissible and which are not (Treviño, 1986). Although many employees can and do seek guidance on moral matters from colleagues (Treviño, 1990), the advice they receive often varies according to whom they ask. Coworkers can send mixed signals about what constitutes morally appropriate behavior. Indeed, the viewpoints expressed by top management frequently differ from those expressed by immediate supervisors, close peers, or even an organization's formal code of conduct (Jones & Ryan, 1997; Tenbrunsel, Smith-Crowe, & Umphress, 2003).

Given this ambiguity surrounding ethical standards in the workplace, it may seem prudent for managers to refrain from punishing others harshly for their moral transgressions. When managers are judged as having punished others inappropriately, they not only damage their own reputations, but also risk eliciting negative attitudes, counterproductive behaviors, and revenge tactics from those punished (e.g., Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980; Ball & Sims, 1991; Ball, Treviño, & Sims, 1994; Butterfield, Treviño, & Ball, 1996; Butterfield, Treviño, Wade, & Ball, 2005; Treviño, 1992). Moreover, punishing transgressors in ways that are seen as inappropriate can reduce a manager's influence (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 1994) by weakening the perceived legitimacy of his or her authority (Cohen-Charash, & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Yee, 2001; Tyler, 2006; van Dijke, De Cremer, & Mayer, 2010).

Faced with these risks, managers might prefer to err on the side of caution when deciding whether to administer punishment and how much punishment to administer. However, we propose that adopting such a cautious approach may be more difficult for managers than it

seems. Basing our hypotheses on power-approach theory (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) and recent work linking power and certainty (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007; Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009; Hallin, Øgaard, & Marnburg, 2009), we propose that people who possess power (e.g., high-level managers in organizations) perceive less ambiguity surrounding ethical standards and therefore are more willing to administer severe punishment for an apparent violation than do those who have less power. Specifically, we propose that the subjective experience of power can increase punishment severity by instilling a heightened sense of moral clarity.

In investigating the link between power and punishment, we aim to make two meaningful contributions to the scholarly literatures on power and ethical decision-making in organizations. First, we introduce the concept of moral clarity, which captures the degree of ambiguity people perceive when judging whether behaviors are right or wrong. We discuss how moral clarity differs from related constructs, such as moral awareness and moral identity, and explain how changes in moral clarity (both trait- and state-based) can account for changes in how severely people punish others for their transgressions. Second, we suggest that the psychological experience of power can affect how people view, and react to, ethical transgressions in the workplace because it strengthens a person's sense of moral clarity. As managers vary in the amount of power they hold, and in how powerful they feel, understanding how an increase in power can affect punishment severity through the psychological mechanism of moral clarity may enable a better understanding of how managers decide to take punitive action.

### **Power and Social Judgment**

Following others, we define power as the ability to control valued resources and administer rewards and punishments<sup>1</sup> (Emerson, 1962; French & Raven, 1959; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This definition of power parallels the resource-dependence view in which power stems from control over valued resources (Emerson, 1962; Pfeffer, 1980; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). It differs from Russell's (1938) view, which defines power as freedom or personal agency, and Dahl's (1957) view, which defines power as the capacity for one person to control the responses of another. Power differs from status, which is the standing an individual holds within a social hierarchy (e.g., Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001). It also differs from dominance, which is defined as exhibiting gestures used to establish or maintain status in a social hierarchy (e.g., Jolly, 1972; Rosa & Mazur, 1979) or to advance the interests of the self (e.g., Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011).

Although research on power and punishment is abundant, no study to date has examined how the power of the punisher affects the severity of punishment. On one hand, power might lead people to administer less severe forms of punishment. Because the powerful tend to be more self-focused than the powerless (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008), the powerful may be less likely to show concern for others' transgressions and subsequently less motivated to deliver harsh punishment. Further, powerful people tend to have an enhanced sense of control (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009), which may lead them to believe that they will be less likely to suffer as a result of others' transgressions. If powerful individuals do not feel as concerned or as vulnerable as their powerless counterparts, they may feel less motivated to punish others for immoral acts.

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<sup>1</sup> Both the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless have some capacity to punish others for their actions (Molm, Quist, & Wisely, 1994).

On the other hand, the psychological experience of power could embolden managers to punish others more severely for several reasons. First, powerful people may take harsh action to exhibit their power (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993). By demonstrating that they can punish others, they provide evidence that they have control. Some scholars have taken this logic a step further, arguing that powerful people *must* demonstrate their power frequently to maintain their standing in the eyes of others (McCall, 1989; Thompson & Luthans, 1983). That is, severe punishment can be functional because it helps to preserve power. Second, powerful individuals might punish transgressors more severely because they are accustomed to having their decisions accepted unquestioningly (Barnard, 1971; Simon, 1997; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007) and thus anticipate less resistance to their punishment decisions. Third, powerful individuals may recommend harsher punishment because they are inclined to focus on the welfare of the group as a whole (Smith & Trope, 2006), and thus are more concerned with the deterrence value of severe punishment (cf. Schnake, 1986). Lastly, power may increase severity of punishment because the powerful use stricter moral standards than do the powerless when judging others' transgressions (Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010).

We advance a similar view—that an increased sense of power may lead to an increase in punishment—but we propose an alternative mechanism. We suggest that power increases the severity of punishment because it decreases the ambiguity with which people see the morality of others' behaviors (i.e., powerful people view moral transgressions in black-and-white terms, rather than shades of gray). We focus on this specific psychological mechanism because it suggests a novel, intrapsychic account for the link between power and punishment, rather than a social account that can be explained by extant theory. According to our view, powerful individuals are more willing to punish others severely because they construe moral problems

differently from those who are less powerful. Put another way, moral judgment may be a confusing and ambiguous endeavor for many people, but it may be relatively less confusing and ambiguous for those who are powerful.

### **The Potential for Ambiguity in Moral Judgment**

Moral judgments are rarely viewed as cut and dry; instead, people frequently differ in what they believe constitutes a moral transgression. Existing models of moral decision-making can help explain these differences. For example, in Rest's (1986) four-stage process of ethical decision making, which involves moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intent, and moral action (cf., Jones, 1991; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006), many dispositional and situational factors can affect how aware an individual is that a situation contains moral content and how immoral he or she perceives a particular behavior to be. Such factors can also affect how people respond to actions perceived as immoral.

Different people may also come up with conflicting assessments of whether a particular behavior is immoral because they use distinct rule-based approaches to ethical judgment (e.g., Jones, Phelps, & Bigley, 2007). For example, John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism (1861) holds that behaviors are right if they maximize happiness within society as a whole; Kant's (1785) categorical imperative avers that people should "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (p. 9); Rawls (1971) argues that decisions should be made under a veil of ignorance, in which people act as though they are unaware of their own social position and circumstance while deciding what is right; and, finally, the conventional view of ethics (e.g., Mackie, 1977; Fritzsche & Becker, 1984; Kohlberg, 1969; 1981; Payne & Giacalone, 1986; Phillips, 1992; Toffler, 1986; Turiel, 2002) holds that moral decisions should be calibrated according to what society decides is ethical.

Although each of these principles can help people evaluate the ethicality of behaviors, organizational scholars have noted the challenge of applying such principles in the business world (Barnett, Bass, & Brown, 1994; Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Mayo & Marks, 1990). Managers rarely use a purely principle-based (i.e., deontological) or purely ends-based (i.e., teleological) approach, but instead draw from multiple approaches to inform their decisions (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990). Both the blending and the plurality of these approaches can make it difficult for managers to decide whether behaviors are ethical, as different approaches to ethics often lead to different conclusions. Even if one uses the conventional view of ethics, which avers that people collectively decide upon ethical principles through their behavior and conversations with others (Phillips, 1992; Schweder, 1982; Wieder, 1974), there is still great potential for ambiguity about what is ethical because individuals often fail to recognize socially shared standards (Flynn & Wiltermuth, 2010). Thus, managers may not know with certainty whether specific behaviors would be generally viewed as ethical violations.

We introduce the construct of moral clarity to capture how certain individuals feel when judging potential ethical transgressions. People asked to evaluate the morality of a behavior may be relatively certain or uncertain that their judgment is appropriate. That is, they may see the issue in plain terms, in which case they would be relatively certain of their judgment, or they may see the issue in more nebulous terms, in which case they would be relatively uncertain. We assert that moral clarity not only reflects certainty of judgment (and would therefore fall into the moral judgment stage of Rest's moral decision-making process), but also emboldens the perceiver to act on his or her judgment (and therefore affects the moral action stage). That is, with a stronger sense of moral clarity, people may feel more licensed to administer punishment in response to perceived ethical transgressions.



### **Power and Moral Clarity**

We propose that moral clarity will be more readily available to some individuals than to others. In particular, we suggest that powerful individuals experience moral clarity to a greater degree than do those who are relatively powerless. We base this hypothesis on several recent findings supporting the idea that power leads to overconfidence in judgment (e.g., Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012). For example, Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, and Becerra (2007) found that an increase in power boosted confidence in one's own beliefs. People who were primed to feel powerful before reading a persuasive message were less attentive to that message because they felt more confident in their initial beliefs relative to those who were not primed with power. Further, individuals primed with power *after* reading the persuasive message were more reliant on arguments in the message because they were more confident in their recently generated thoughts. In both cases, the psychological experience of power increased people's confidence in their beliefs.

The managerial hubris demonstrated by powerful CEOs who are willing to pay large premiums to acquire companies (Hayward & Hambrick, 1997) and to engage in risky corporate ventures (Li & Tang, 2010) paints a similar picture of power leading to overconfidence. So too does Flynn and Wiltermuth's (2010) finding that employees who were brokers in an advice network (i.e., those who scored high on betweenness centrality, a measure closely linked to social power; see Brass, 1984; 1985; Krackhardt, 1987) were more likely to overestimate support for their own viewpoints. In this case, power instilled confidence that one's ethical beliefs were socially shared and thus appropriate. Paralleling these findings, Magee, Milliken, and Lurie (2010) found that power leads to certainty in speech. Specifically, powerful people involved in the events surrounding September 11<sup>th</sup> made statements indicating greater certainty (e.g., "We

are quite confident of Pakistan's support, and we're going to continue to move forward”) relative to those who lacked power (e.g., “I don't know how they're going to do it”).

These findings are consistent with the approach/inhibition theory of power. According to this model, power activates the behavioral approach system, which leads people to move toward satisfying their appetitive desires (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) and to think and behave in more goal-directed ways (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Ferguson, Ormiston, & Moon; 2010; Guinote, 2007). For powerful people, a strong goal orientation causes them to lose sight of others' views (Erber & Fiske, 1984; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) unless others' views can help further the powerholder's goals (Overbeck & Park, 2001; 2006). As a result of this self-centered focus, powerful people perform poorly at perspective-taking tasks and lack empathic accuracy (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006). This tendency to disregard others' views (particularly when those views are contradictory) should enable powerful individuals to judge complex ethical issues with a greater sense of clarity because they would be left with only one viewpoint to consider (i.e., their own).

Finally, one reason why powerful individuals may experience relatively higher levels of moral clarity is their reliance on deontological moral thinking styles based on fixed rules of conduct (Lammers & Stapel, 2009). When using a deontological approach to moral decision-making, a person can simply ask herself whether the behavior violates a rule that pertains to the behavior. In contrast, when using a teleological approach, she must consider the magnitude of the negative impact on the victim of the behavior, the magnitude of the positive impact on herself and/or others, and the magnitude of harm that this action will incur in the future because it sets a precedent. The ambiguity surrounding these estimations of harm would not be relevant for someone taking a deontological approach. Thus, people using deontological approaches to

morality may harbor less doubt about their decisions. This does not mean that powerful people better understand what is moral. Instead, it suggests that a powerful person is more inclined to *believe* he or she knows what is moral.

Together, this combination of factors (increased certainty of one's views, deontological reasoning, discounting and ignorance of others' views, etc.) leads us to put forth the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: An increase in power leads to an increase in moral clarity.*

What are the consequences of having moral clarity, or a firmer view of what constitutes an ethical violation? We propose that when managers are more certain that another person's action violates ethical standards, they will be less hesitant to levy severe punishment than when they harbor doubts. As Butt stated (2000, p. 96), "It is surely the certainty that comes from absolute knowledge that leads to intolerance and persecution." In a similar sense, people who are more certain about moral judgments should feel more entitled and emboldened to impose their views on others, levying more severe punishments because they feel relatively less constrained by doubt. Of course, moral clarity may also lead people to let others escape punishment entirely if their sense of clarity indicates that the target did not violate moral standards. Thus, moral clarity should be positively correlated with punishment severity only when those behaviors are viewed as transgressions. We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: People who possess a stronger sense of moral clarity are more severe in punishing others for perceived ethical transgressions.*

Together, the preceding hypotheses establish a causal pathway between power and punishment that highlights the critical role of moral clarity. According to our theorizing, and that of others, the psychological mindset that accompanies a position of power should heighten an individual's sense of moral clarity (i.e., decrease ambiguity in judging ethical behavior). Further, an increase in moral clarity should lead people to punish others more severely for perceived transgressions because greater confidence in their moral judgments will strengthen their willingness to take punitive action. As a whole, these ideas imply that the psychological experience of power should lead people to punish others more severely *because* powerful individuals experience a heightened sense of moral clarity. In other words, moral clarity should mediate the relationship between power and severity of judgment, which leads us to put forth the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3: Moral clarity mediates the relationship between power and severity of punishment.<sup>2</sup>*

### **Overview and Summary of Predictions**

We propose that power will heighten the clarity with which people see the morality of others' behaviors and, in turn, lead them to recommend more severe punishment for perceived

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<sup>2</sup> According to this logic, one might also expect power to lead people to issue more extreme rewards for moral deeds through the experience of heightened moral clarity. However, we would suspect that this is not the case. Instead, people have a stronger need to feel certain before allocating punishment than allocating rewards because backlash is more likely to result from excessive punishment than excessive reward. We therefore suspect that the link between moral clarity and punishment may be stronger than the link between moral clarity and reward. Indeed, while we do not offer specific hypotheses linking power and extremity of reward through moral clarity, we did analyze the link between power and more extreme rewards for good deeds, and we did not find that power increased moral clarity about good deeds. Full results for these analyses are available from the first author.

ethical transgressions. We test our ideas across four studies, using multiple operationalizations of moral clarity. Study 1 tests our prediction that power will make people less likely to express uncertainty when classifying the ethicality of morally questionable behaviors. Study 2 examines whether moral clarity can predict how severely people would recommend punishing others who committed moral transgressions. Study 3 examines whether clarity causes an increase in the severity of punishment. Finally, Study 4 tests our mediation model in its entirety. In this final study, we investigate whether role-based power leads people to view the ethicality of an individual's actions with greater moral clarity, and, if so, whether this heightened sense of moral clarity can explain the relationship between power and severity of punishment.

### **STUDY 1: POWER AND CLARITY IN JUDGING MORAL DILEMMAS**

Study 1 investigates whether the experience of power leads people to possess a heightened sense of moral clarity. We assessed moral clarity by instructing participants to provide a certain (“yes” or “no”) or uncertain (“it depends”) response when asked about the ethicality of a specific behavior in the context of a “right versus right” moral dilemma. We interpreted certain responses as evidence of clarity. Thus, we were not interested in whether participants thought the specified action was relatively more moral than the alternative action. Rather, we were interested only in whether people would respond with certainty. The study included a power condition and a control condition.

#### **Method**

***Participants.*** Forty-nine working adults (68% female; age  $M = 36.5$ ,  $SD = 11.8$ ) from a national participant pool managed by a private university on the West Coast of the United States participated in the study in exchange for a \$5 Amazon.com gift certificate.

***Design and Procedure.*** The study included a power condition and a control condition. Participants completed either a recall-based manipulation of power or wrote about how they spent the previous day (see Galinsky et al., 2003). Participants subsequently viewed a series of six hypothetical scenarios that describe ethical dilemmas in a workplace setting. After reading each scenario, participants were asked to rate whether the behavior described was “ethical” by choosing one of three responses: “Yes,” “No,” or “It depends.” We were interested in how often participants would respond by choosing “It depends” instead of “Yes” or “No.” Participants also provided basic demographic information.

***Power Manipulation.*** To manipulate the psychological experience of power, we used a popular recall prime (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Fast et al., 2009). Participants randomly assigned to the control condition were asked to spend six minutes writing about how they spent the previous day. Participants randomly assigned to the power condition were asked to recall a time in their lives when they felt powerful. Specifically, they read, “Please recall a particular incident in which you had power over another individual or individuals. By power, we mean a situation in which you controlled the ability of another person or persons to get something they wanted, or were in a position to evaluate those individuals. Please describe this situation in which you had power: events, feelings, thoughts, etc...” They were then instructed to write about that time in concrete detail, reliving the experience as much as possible as they described the event, their feelings, and the surrounding circumstances.

***Classification of Behaviors in Ethical Dilemmas.*** Participants viewed six hypothetical scenarios describing a behavioral response to an ethical dilemma. Each scenario was developed by Flynn and Wiltermuth (2010) and was based on Kidder’s (1995) taxonomy of “right vs. right”

ethical dilemmas, in which two moral values are placed in direct opposition. For example, in a dilemma pitting truth against loyalty, participants read the following scenario:

“Your colleague, whom you consider to be a friend, is looking to hire a new manager in her department. She has identified an external candidate she would like to hire, but company rules require her to consider internal candidates first. She has asked you not to disclose to people within the company that she has already picked out an external candidate for the position. However, you know two employees in your area who would like to have this job, and each has asked you directly if your colleague has already picked someone for this position. You decide to tell them that she has not picked anyone yet.”

Following each of the six scenarios, participants were asked to indicate whether the decision described in the scenario was ethical (“yes,” “no,” or “it depends”).<sup>3</sup> We counted the number of times the participant chose “it depends,” which yielded a number between zero and six ( $M = 1.18$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ).

## Results and Discussion

*Manipulation Check.* A coder blind to condition rated how much power the participant reported having in each essay. Participants writing the high-power essays described themselves as having more power ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) than did participants in the control-condition essays ( $M = 1.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ),  $t(30) = 13.87$ ,  $p < .001$ . No participant in the control condition wrote about an incident that included strong power dynamics.

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<sup>3</sup> A panel of seven experts in the psychology of morality used a seven-point scale (1: Not at all; 7: Very much) to indicate how well the questions we used in our studies reflected the construct of moral clarity. The high mean of 5.83 ( $SD = 0.98$ ) suggests that these experts saw the measure as appropriately capturing moral clarity.

*Main Analyses.* As predicted in Hypothesis 1, people who completed the power manipulation chose “it depends” less often ( $M = .84$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) than did those in the control condition ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ , Mann-Whitney  $U = 197$ ,  $Z = 2.15$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = .61$ ). People who were primed to feel more powerful were no more likely than those in the control condition to choose “no” ( $p = .47$ ) or “yes” ( $p = .60$ ) in response to the question of whether the described decision was ethical. Thus, it was not the case that participants in the high-power condition exhibited different values in these “right vs. right” moral dilemmas relative to participants in the control condition. Rather, they evaluated the action with greater certainty.

## **STUDY 2: CLARITY AND EXTREMITY OF PUNISHMENT**

Study 2 examines three key questions. First, it investigates whether moral clarity predicts severity of punishment for ethical transgressions. Second, it explores whether perceived immorality can moderate the effect of moral clarity on severity of punishment. Moral clarity may have a much stronger influence on severity of punishment when the individual judges the action to be more immoral than when the individual judges the action to be less immoral. In the former case, the individual is relatively certain that the action is immoral. Third, Study 2 investigates how moral clarity relates to other constructs within the domain of ethical decision-making in an attempt to establish its convergent and discriminant validity (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). We suggest that moral clarity differs from moral awareness, which is the degree to which an individual recognizes that a situation contains moral content (Butterfield, Treviño, & Weaver, 2000; Reynolds, 2006; 2008). It also differs from moral attentiveness and moral sensitivity. Moral attentiveness is “the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences” (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1028). Along a



similar vein, those high in moral sensitivity will be, by definition, better able to identify moral issues when they exist than will those low in moral sensitivity (Sparks & Hunt, 1998).

Moral awareness, moral attentiveness, and moral sensitivity refer to whether people view situations as involving moral content, whereas moral clarity refers to how certain people are in judging the morality of a behavior within a specific situation. Kohlberg's (1969) famous "Heinz Dilemma" illustrates the distinction. In this case, a man must choose whether to steal a drug he cannot afford in order to save his wife's life. The overwhelming majority of people may believe that this decision involves moral concerns (indicating moral attentiveness, moral sensitivity, and moral awareness). However, a smaller portion of the population may be certain that the husband's subsequent behavior is either moral, immoral, or neither. In other words, most individuals would demonstrate moral awareness in this situation, but not moral clarity.<sup>4</sup>

In Study 2, we examine behaviors that people are likely to regard as moderately immoral. We concentrate on these behaviors because when people hold extreme judgments of morality—viewing a behavior as extremely immoral or not at all immoral—they are unlikely to vary in their level of certainty. Thus, our results regarding moral clarity would not necessarily generalize to actions that are viewed as extremely immoral (e.g., killing a co-worker) or not immoral at all (e.g., contemplating what to eat for lunch on work time).

## Method

**Participants.** Forty-eight adults (56% female; age  $M = 30.2$ ,  $SD = 9.6$ ) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk participated in this study in exchange for three dollars.

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<sup>4</sup> Moral clarity is also distinct from the construct of moral conviction, which focuses on the centrality of the belief to the self, the extremity of the belief, and the importance of the belief (e.g., Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2006; Skitka & Mullen, 2002). If an individual felt certain that an act was morally wrong, but did not feel the issue was particularly important, or that it implicated their self-concept in some way, that individual would possess moral clarity but the belief would not qualify as a moral conviction.

*Design and Procedure.* In this study, we chose to operationalize moral clarity as a chronic disposition in order to complement the state-based operationalizations that we utilize in our other studies. Together, these diverse measures should enhance our understanding of the construct (Judd & Kenny, 1981). Following the example set by Tangney (1990) in her study of self-conscious emotions, we attempted to gauge participants' general sense of moral clarity by asking them to respond to specific behaviors rather than asking them to evaluate their own moral clarity directly. We did this because people may encounter difficulty when attempting to evaluate their own sense of moral clarity independent of any context.

We tested whether differences in moral clarity between subjects would predict punishment for negative deeds. Participants reviewed two different sets of vignettes that described potential transgressions. In response to each of the vignettes in the first set, we asked participants to report their sense of moral clarity, and in response to each of the vignettes in the second set, we asked participants to report their recommended severity of punishment. We included two separate sets of vignettes so that we could measure moral clarity and severity of punishment independently. Doing this can help ensure that the moral clarity items do not directly prime or bias responses to the punishment severity items.

To establish the convergent validity of our measure of moral clarity, we administered a number of other scales that may be related to, but distinct from, moral clarity. We expected modest correlations between our questions assessing moral clarity and responses to these additional scales. To establish discriminant validity, we also included some measures (e.g., Paulhus's (1984) impression management subscale of social desirability) that we did not expect to correlate positively with moral clarity.

***Moral Awareness.*** To assess moral awareness, we asked participants to view a series of four vignettes developed by Reynolds (2006). These vignettes manipulated whether any harm resulted from a character's action and whether the character violated a behavioral norm. After each vignette, participants answered three questions from Reynolds's (2006) Moral Awareness Scale (e.g., "There are very important ethical aspects to this situation"), using 7-point continuous scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). As with all scales in this study, we left the midpoints unlabeled. We calculated coefficient alphas by collapsing the three items for each of the four vignettes to produce twelve-item scales for moral awareness associated with these vignettes ( $\alpha = .63$ ). To counter the concern that alphas increase with the number of items included in the scale (e.g., Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), we also calculated the average alphas across the vignettes ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

***Moral Clarity.*** We asked five questions intended to capture the clarity with which participants viewed the ethicality of the behavior described in each of Reynolds's (2006) vignettes. These included: "How certain are you that your classification of the actor's behavior as either immoral or not immoral is correct?"; "How confident are you that your classification of the actor's behavior as either immoral or not immoral is correct?"; "If you classified the actor's behavior as immoral, how clear was it that the actor's behavior was actually immoral?" (or "If you classified the actor's behavior as not immoral, how clear was it that the actor's behavior was not immoral?"); "How clear is it that others would agree with your classification of the morality of the actor's behavior?"; and "How ambiguous was the morality of the actor's behavior?" (reverse scored). Participants responded using a seven-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). We calculated the alphas by collapsing the five items for each of the four vignettes to produce

20-item scales for moral clarity associated with the vignettes depicting negative behavior ( $\alpha = .88$ ). We also calculated the average alphas across the vignettes ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

**Impression Management.** Participants completed the 20-item impression management subscale of Paulhus's (1989) social desirability measure, which captures how much people actively manage others' impressions of socially desirable traits (e.g., "I never conceal my mistakes"; 1 = not true, 7 = very true; per Paulhus, 1984, responses 1–5 were coded 0, 6–7 were coded 1;  $\alpha = .72$ ).

**Moral Identity.** Participants completed the two subscales of Aquino and Reed's (2002) Moral Identity Scale: the internalization subscale ("I strongly desire to have these characteristics," [referencing nine listed moral traits];  $\alpha = .81$ ) and the symbolization subscale (e.g., "The kinds of books and magazines that I read identify me as having these characteristics,"  $\alpha = .51$ ). Both subscales were composed of five items, which ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. We included moral identity scales because past research has found that moral identity can affect the extremity of moral judgments (Wiltermuth, Monin, & Chow, 2010).

**Moral Orientation.** Participants also completed Brady and Wheeler's (1996) measures of utilitarian ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and formalist ( $\alpha = .74$ ) moral predispositions because formalist orientations may be related to heightened moral clarity. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which traits associated with each predisposition are important to them (e.g., "Results oriented" and "Principled"; 1 = not important to me, 7 = very important to me). Participants also completed Lammers and Stapel's (2009) 12-item measure of the importance of rule-based and outcome-based moral principles (e.g., "I find it important to maintain rules"; 1 = not important to me, 7 = very important to me;  $\alpha = .77$ ). Higher numbers denote more rule-based moral thinking.

***Moral Attentiveness.*** Participants completed Reynolds's (2008) 13-item Moral Attentiveness Scale (e.g., "I think about the morality of my actions almost every day"; 1 = not important to me, 7 = very important to me;  $\alpha = .90$ ), which reflects how much individuals chronically perceive and consider moral elements in their everyday experiences. We included this scale and the moral awareness scale because people who are morally attentive or morally aware may be particularly likely to possess high degrees of moral clarity.

***Morality Ratings of Transgressions.*** Participants concluded the experiment by viewing seven separate vignettes. These vignettes, modeled after those created by Carlsmith, Darley, and Robinson (2002), described individuals performing unethical acts within a business context. The behaviors included downloading copyrighted materials from the Internet while at work without paying for those materials, pretending to be sick six days per year to avoid coming in to work, claiming credit for a colleague's work, reading a colleague's email or going through her stuff without the colleague's approval, padding a résumé by listing positions never held, taking home office supplies from one's job for personal use, and using company time to run one's own small business. After reading each of these vignettes, participants used a seven-point continuous scale to rate the morality of the transgression (1 = not immoral at all, 7 = very immoral;  $\alpha = .85$ ).

***Extremity of Punishment.*** Participants indicated how severely a person should be punished for engaging in each of the transgressions described in the second set of vignettes (1 = not severely at all, 7 = very severely;  $\alpha = .83$ ).

## Results

***Convergent and Discriminant Validity.*** Table 1 reports means and correlations among study variables.<sup>5</sup> The results largely conform to expectations. Moral clarity significantly and

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<sup>5</sup> We aggregated extremity of punishment ratings for this table by averaging ratings for each of the behaviors described in the second set of vignettes.

positively correlated with moral identity internalization, extremity of judgment, and endorsement of formalism. The strong positive correlations with these related constructs support the convergent validity of our measure of moral clarity. The measure of moral clarity did not correlate with moral attentiveness. Similarly, it did not correlate with utilitarianism. The lack of correlation with these constructs provides preliminary evidence of the discriminant validity of our measure of moral clarity (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Moral clarity did correlate positively with moral awareness.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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***Moral Clarity and Severity of Punishment.*** We tested whether participants' moral clarity, based on their responses to the actions described in Reynolds's (2006) vignettes, was associated with how severely they would punish others for committing the transgressions described in the vignettes we adapted from Carlsmith et al. (2002). We also tested whether moral clarity would have a stronger influence on severity of punishment when the individual judges the action to be strongly immoral than when the individual judges the action to be less immoral. To test these hypotheses, we used two-level hierarchical linear random-intercept models with severity of punishment as the dependent variable. This analysis allowed us to predict the severity of punishment that participants estimated for each behavior (level 1) using characteristics of the individual participant (level 2).

We first regressed severity of punishment on perceived immorality and moral clarity. We examined both the main effect of moral clarity and its effect on the slope of the relationship

between perceived immorality and severity of punishment. In this initial regression, the main effect of moral clarity on punishment was not significant ( $p = .26$ ). As displayed in Model 1 of Table 2, moral clarity significantly affected the strength of the relationship between perceived immorality and punishment ( $B_{\text{intx}} = .27, SE = .09, t(280) = 2.87, p = .01$ ). We conducted the same regression controlling for perceived immorality, moral attentiveness, moral judgment, formalist and utilitarian predispositions, deontological orientations, and the internalized and symbolized dimensions of moral identity. As displayed in Model 2 of Table 2, moral clarity had a significant positive effect on severity of punishment ( $B = .39, SE = .17, t(38) = 2.31, p = .03$ ), and a significant effect on the strength of the relationship between perceived immorality and severity of punishment ( $B = .17, SE = .06, t(280) = 2.62, p = .01$ ). Figure 1 displays this interaction, which indicates that moral clarity has a stronger influence on severity of punishment when the individual perceives the transgression as very immoral than when she does not.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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**Discussion**

In Study 1, a power induction reduced the frequency with which participants expressed uncertainty in judging the ethicality of others' behavior. In Study 2, participants' chronic sense of moral clarity correlated positively with how severely they punished others for their transgressions. Together, Studies 1 and 2 suggest that power may increase severity of punishment by instilling a sense of moral clarity. In addition, Study 2 established the validity of the moral clarity construct by distinguishing it from related constructs, such as moral awareness and moral identity. Finally, the results indicate that moral clarity may play a weak role in

determining punishments for transgressions that are judged as not very immoral. Instead, punishment may be highest when the person judging the behavior views it as immoral and holds a strong sense of moral clarity.

Study 2 has limitations. First, it cannot establish a causal relationship between moral clarity and severity of punishment because the design within each condition was correlational. Second, because we used hypothetical vignettes, Study 2 may not be as externally valid as studies that rely on actual behavior. Third, we found a significant relationship between moral clarity and severity of moral judgment only when we controlled for other factors that may affect moral judgment. Thus, the results offer somewhat equivocal support for our hypotheses. Studies 3 and 4 are intended to remedy these weaknesses.

### **STUDY 3: INCREASED CLARITY CAUSES AN INCREASE IN PUNISHMENT**

Study 3 complements Study 2 by demonstrating a causal relationship between clarity and severity of punishment. The study tests whether priming people with the concept of clarity leads them to recommend more severe punishments relative to people in a control condition.

#### **Method**

**Participants.** 141 online participants (60% female; age  $M = 35.2$ ,  $SD = 12.4$ ) participated in the study.

**Procedure.** Participants first completed a scrambled sentence task that included twenty sets of five words presented in scrambled order. Participants were asked to rearrange four of the words in each set to make a coherent sentence (they typed the sentence and followed it with a period and then the remaining word).

After completing the scrambled sentence task, participants were solicited for advice about a specific punishment decision. In particular, they were informed that many past participants in



the lab's on-campus pool had exhibited problematic behavior. The behaviors included signing up for studies and, on at least two occasions, failing to show up for them; attempting to take the same study multiple times to earn additional money; using a smartphone to cheat on tests within the studies; creating a second research account under a different name to earn additional money; and skipping large sections of questionnaires to finish studies earlier.

We told participants that the lab managers were interested in their recommendations of appropriate punishments. Participants could recommend barring individuals from participating in future studies for any two-month interval between zero and twelve months. Using this scale, participants provided a recommended punishment for each of the problematic behaviors.

We then administered a nine-item moral clarity questionnaire ( $\alpha = .73$ ) to test if our manipulation of clarity had an effect. Participants used a seven-point continuous scale (1: Strongly disagree; 7: Strongly agree) to indicate their level of agreement with items such as: "I know when a behavior is morally wrong, even when others are less certain about it" and "It is sometimes difficult to tell whether a behavior is morally right or morally wrong" (reverse-scored). Participants concluded the experiment by providing their age and gender.

***Clarity Manipulation.*** The experimental design had two conditions: clarity and control. In the clarity condition, nine of the words in the scrambled sentences related to clarity (e.g., definitive, certain). These words were antonyms of words that Wichman, Brunner, and Weary (2008) used to indicate uncertainty. In the control condition, we substituted neutral words (e.g., yellow, charred) for the words related to clarity.

## **Results**

**Manipulation Check.** Participants in the certain condition scored marginally higher on the moral clarity scale ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) than did those in the control condition, ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ),  $t(136) = 1.71$ ,  $p = .09$ .

**Main Analyses.** A comparison of participants' aggregated punishment ratings ( $\alpha = .78$ ) revealed that participants who were primed with clarity issued longer punishments ( $M = 7.12$ ,  $SD = 2.72$ ) than did participants in the control condition ( $M = 6.19$ ,  $SD = 2.30$ ;  $t(139) = 2.05$ ,  $p = .04$ ). We tested this effect using two-level hierarchical linear random-intercept models with severity of punishment as the dependent variable and a dummy variable representing the clarity condition as the independent variable. This approach allowed us to examine how clarity (i.e. level 2) predicted punishment ratings (level 1). The analysis revealed a significant effect for clarity ( $B = 0.23$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t(114) = 2.05$ ,  $p = .05$ ).

## **Discussion**

Study 3 demonstrated a causal relationship between clarity and severity of punishment. Priming the concept of clarity led participants to recommend longer punishments for delinquent and unethical laboratory participants. In our fourth, and final, study, we examine whether power can instill a sense of clarity, which, in turn, can increase severity of punishment in responding to moral transgressions.

### **STUDY 4: CLARITY MEDIATES THE POWER–PUNISHMENT LINK**

In Study 4, we test our mediation model by using a role-based manipulation of power to determine whether power increases punishment severity by increasing moral clarity. Study 4 also tests the alternative hypothesis that power increases punishment severity by leading people to see potential transgressions as more immoral. The study tests these hypotheses by assessing whether participants who felt more powerful were more inclined to assign transgressors more aversive

tasks—a common method managers use to mete out punishment in the workplace (Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980).

## **Method**

***Participants.*** One hundred students (45% female; age  $M = 20.8$ ,  $SD = 2.5$ ) at a private university on the West Coast participated in the study in exchange for course credit plus two to four dollars of extra compensation. During the debriefing, two participants expressed suspicion about a confederate being involved in the study; we excluded their responses and those of two participants who completed the questionnaires exceedingly quickly.

***Design and Procedure.*** The experimental design was a 2 (role: high power vs. low power) x 2 (judged behavior: transgression vs. control). Groups were composed of four or five actual participants plus one confederate.

***Introduction and Questionnaires.*** We began the experiment by seating participants and the confederate around a circular table and asking them to say their first names and the participant letter assigned to them, which was indicated on placards. Participants then completed the Managing Change Questionnaire (Church, Siegal, Javitch, Waclawski, & Burke, 1996)—a 25-item true/false questionnaire that assesses an individual's understanding of how to manage organizational change effectively. Their instructions for this questionnaire included a payoff grid detailing how much money they would make given various levels of performance on the questionnaire. Next we asked participants to complete the “Management Questionnaire” (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002), which ostensibly assessed leadership acumen. This second questionnaire instructed participants to report their grade point average and past leadership positions. It also asked them to rate themselves on a number of personality traits.

***Power Manipulation.*** Following others (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003), we manipulated power using a coordination task that involved assembling a tanagram. Participants were assigned either a “manager” role (high-power) or a “builder” role (low-power) and informed that the roles were assigned on the basis of participants’ responses to questions about their leadership skills; in fact, we randomly assigned the roles before the participants arrived. The participants’ instructions included a list of the other participants with whom they would be working to complete the task.

The managers’ instruction sheets stated that they would be in charge of directing a group of subordinates in building a tanagram. Specifically, the instructions read: “You will decide how to structure the process for building the tanagram and the standards by which the work is to be evaluated. In addition, you will evaluate the builders at the end of the session, in a private questionnaire—that is, the builders will never see your evaluation. The builders will not have the opportunity to evaluate you. Thus, as a manager, you will be in charge of directing the building and evaluating your subordinates.”

The builders were informed that they would be responsible for building a tanagram according to instructions given by their manager. Specifically, they were told, “Your manager will call you in to give you instructions when ready. Your manager will decide how to structure the process for building the tanagram and the standards by which the work is to be evaluated. Which tasks you complete will be decided by the manager. In addition, you will be evaluated by the manager at the end of the session. This evaluation will be private; that is, you will not see your manager’s evaluation of you. Only the manager will be in charge of directing production and evaluating your performance.”

To strengthen this power manipulation, we asked participants in the manager role to write for a couple minutes on how they would exercise control during the tanagram exercise and participants in the builder role to write about their ability to understand and follow instructions.

***The Transgression.*** Shortly after the power manipulation, we paid participants for their performance on the Managing Change Questionnaire. In the transgression condition, we overpaid the confederate by covertly substituting a five-dollar bill for a one-dollar bill.<sup>6</sup> Participants' payoff grids indicated that no participant should be able to earn the total of six dollars received by the confederate. In the transgression condition, the confederate waited until the experimenter left the room before announcing, "Score! He gave me a five instead of a one," and then keeping the five-dollar bill. In the control condition, the confederate received two dollars, which was a typical amount received by actual participants.

***Measures of Punishment.*** Next, the experimenter escorted participants to private computer carrels. The instructions presented on the computer screen informed participants that they would be asked to complete a set of individual tasks after completing the group task. The participant would be given the opportunity to help allocate tasks to two other participants, Participant B (who was the confederate) and Participant D (or another letter depending upon the participant's letter). No participants were paired with the confederate on the tanagram task and participants did not know whether the confederate had been assigned a manager or builder role. Participants read that there were six possible tasks they could assign. We did not provide participants with a full description of each task, but instead provided them with past participants' ratings of how interesting they had found the task to be (1 = Not interesting at all, 7 = Very interesting). Current participants were told that the average ratings for the seven tasks were 1.2,

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<sup>6</sup> A sample of sixteen pre-test participants (56% female) indicated on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1: Not at all, 7: Very much), that that they viewed keeping the five dollar bill to be unethical ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) and immoral ( $M = 5.75$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ).

2.8, 3.6, 4.8, 5.5, and 6.7. Participants could assign the same task to both of the other participants if they wished to do so. We instructed participants that we would combine their task allocation decisions with one other person's decisions to determine which task would be assigned to each of the participants they rated. Thus, participants believed that two people would be determining the task assignment of each person within the group. Participants' assignment of tasks to the confederate served as the primary dependent variable.

*Questionnaires.* Participants then completed questionnaires measuring moral awareness, moral attentiveness, internalization of moral identity, and symbolization of moral identity (the same scales used in Study 2). We also asked five questions to gauge participants' sense of moral clarity about the behavior of the confederate. Specifically, we asked them, "How certain (confident) are you that your classification of Participant B's behavior as either immoral or not immoral is correct?"; "If you classified Participant B's behavior as immoral, how clear was it that Participant B's behavior was actually immoral? If you classified Participant B's behavior as not immoral, how clear was it that Participant B's behavior was not immoral?"; "How clear is it that others would agree with your classification of the morality of Participant B's behavior?"; and "How ambiguous was the morality of Participant B's behavior?" (reverse-scored). To avoid a priming effect, we did not call their attention to the transgression and asked these questions after the punishment questions. We acknowledge that we cannot establish temporal precedence for our mediator-outcome relationship with this approach.

To measure extremity of judgment, we asked participants to indicate, using seven-point continuous scales (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much), how immoral/unethical/moral (reverse-scored)/improper they viewed the behavior of the confederate to be. Finally, participants used a

seven-point continuous scale to indicate how powerful they felt (1 = Not powerful at all, 7 = Very powerful). We did not label midpoints of the scales.

## Results

***Manipulation Check and Treatment of Variables.*** As expected, participants in the manager role reported feeling more powerful ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) than did participants in the builder role ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ,  $t(98) = 4.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ). We combined the four questions about the extremity of the transgression (i.e., ratings of immorality, unethicity, morality [reverse-scored], and impropriety) into one index ( $\alpha = .72$ ). We also created indices using the five moral clarity items ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Because we collected data in groups, we tested for correlation of punishment within groups. The intra-class correlation coefficient was not significant ( $ICC = .04$ ,  $p = .85$ ). Moreover, the average deviation index of 1.07 did not suggest significant levels of agreement (Burke, Finkelstein, & Dusig, 1999). Thus, we analyzed results at the individual level of analysis.

## *Main Analyses*

Table 3 indicates participants' choice of task for the confederate in each condition as well as the measures of moral clarity and the perceived immorality of the confederate's behavior. Table 4 provides correlations among all study variables. As indicated in Table 4, moral clarity correlated positively with severity of punishment ( $r = .30$ ,  $p = .04$ ) and internalized moral identity ( $r = .29$ ,  $p = .04$ ) in the transgression condition.

To test our main hypotheses, we first conducted a 2 (role: high power vs. low power) x 2 (judged behavior: moral deed vs. transgression vs. control) ANOVA to examine the effect of conditions on severity of punishment. Neither the main effect of role ( $p = .48$ ) nor judged behavior ( $p = .89$ ) was significant. As expected, the interaction of role and judged behavior was

significant ( $F(1,96) = 5.61, p = .02$ ). We examined the exact nature of the interaction by conducting a number of planned contrasts.

Consistent with our predictions, people in the high-power manager role assigned confederates in the transgression condition less interesting tasks ( $M = 4.75, SD = 1.65$ ) than did people in the low-power builder role in the transgression condition ( $M = 5.70, SD = 1.35, t(44.5) = -2.18, p = .04$ ). Role did not significantly affect task assignment in the control condition ( $M = 5.52, SD = 1.35$  vs.  $M = 5.02, SD = 1.74; t(49) = 1.17, p = .25$ ). We repeated the ANOVA described above, replacing task assigned to the confederate with task assigned to the actual participant as the dependent variable. We did not find that role, judged behavior, or the interaction of the two carried over to affect which task was assigned to the participant.

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 Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here  
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We then tested Hypothesis 1, which posited that power would heighten moral clarity. As hypothesized, we found that people in the high-power (i.e., manager) role reported a higher level of moral clarity ( $M = 5.28, SD = 1.58$ ) than did participants in the low-power (i.e., builder) role in the transgression condition ( $M = 4.30, SD = 1.91, t(45.9) = 1.99, p = .05$ ). Consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants who reported a higher level of moral clarity in the transgression condition assigned those confederates less interesting tasks ( $r(49) = -.30, p = .04$ ). Moral clarity did not correlate with assignment of tasks in the control condition ( $p > .90$ ).

We then conducted a bootstrap analysis to test Hypothesis 3, which held that participants in the high-power role would assign the confederate less interesting tasks in the transgression



condition than would those in the low-power role because those in the high-power role possessed a stronger sense of moral clarity. A bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero both when we excluded controls (.001, 0.641) and when we included controls (.005, .955). These values suggest a significant indirect effect (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007; Preacher & Hayes, 2004), which supports Hypothesis 3. However, we again point out that we measured the mediator after we measured the dependent variable.

We then tested the alternative hypothesis that extremity of judgment about the immorality of the confederate's behavior in the transgression condition would explain the relationship between power and severity of punishment. We did not find a significant effect of power on extremity of judgment in the transgression condition ( $M_{HP} = 2.27, SD = 1.19$  vs.  $M_{LP} = 2.68, SD = 1.58, t(47) = 1.02, p = .31$ ). Similarly, extremity of judgment did not predict severity of punishment ( $p > .30$ ). A bootstrap analysis revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the size of the indirect effect of extremity of judgment did not exclude zero (-.080, 0.478). In other words, we did not find any evidence that judgment extremity mediated the effect of power on punishment.

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Insert Table 5 about here

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## Discussion

Study 4 demonstrated that people assigned to structural roles associated with power were more punitive toward those who committed a moral transgression than were those assigned to

structural roles associated with powerlessness. Using a behavioral measure of punishment, we also found that moral clarity mediated the relationship between power and severity of punishment. In contrast to Lammers et al.'s (2010) findings, we did not find that power increased the extent to which participants viewed others' transgressions as being immoral. Perhaps this stems from the fact that the participant had met and interacted with the person committing the transgression, whereas in the Lammers et al. studies, participants rated the immorality of vignette characters or abstract actions. It may be easier for the powerful to see others' actions as immoral from a distance—an idea worth exploring in future research.

### **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Across four studies, we found that the psychological experience of power increased punishment severity. More specifically, the results outline a path from power to punishment: power plays a causal role in strengthening feelings of moral clarity—the level of ambiguity that one perceives in judging a transgression. This moral clarity, in turn, increases how harshly people are willing to punish a transgressor. Because the powerful tend to feel more certain that a focal behavior is immoral (but do not tend to see any act as being more immoral), they are more inclined than the powerless to enforce ethical standards by administering more severe punishment. Taken together, these findings provide strong evidence that power can affect both moral judgment and the punishment of moral transgressions.

#### **Theoretical implications**

We make several theoretical contributions to the growing body of research on ethical decision-making in organizations. First, we introduce the concept of moral clarity—the extent to which people see behaviors in clear terms of right and wrong. Clarity represents an important construct in moral judgment because moral transgressions can vary in how ambiguous they

appear—what seems like a certain violation to one person may not seem so certain to another (Haidt, 2001). In the workplace, moral beliefs often are tacitly held (Turiel, 2002; Haidt, 2001; Treviño, 1986), which means that employees may be uncertain about whether a specific behavior violates ethical standards. This uncertainty might lead employees to be less likely to judge others harshly for their transgressions and less punitive in their responses (Butt, 2000), even when they see others' actions as immoral. In our studies, people perceived different levels of clarity surrounding the same ethical issues and these differences influenced how severely they chose to punish others for an apparent transgression.

Second, our work suggests that social and organizational psychologists need to look beyond the characteristics of the transgressor, the victim, and the situation if they are interested in identifying the antecedents of moral judgments and punishment decisions. In particular, the power of the punisher can affect how severely people punish others, such that more powerful people are relatively more punitive than less powerful people. This result may be surprising to some scholars, who might expect that powerless people would be more severe in administering punishment because they relish the relatively rare opportunity to exert influence. However our research suggests that this is not the case. When asked to consider the same transgression, powerless people seemed to proceed with caution when making moral judgments whereas powerful people were more inclined to throw caution to the wind.

Third, our work touches upon a critical question in power research (Flynn, Gruenfeld, Molm, & Polzer, 2012): should power be conceptualized as a dichotomy or as a continuum? Power researchers often refer to those individuals who possess higher levels of power as the “powerful” and those who possess lower levels as the “powerless.” Further, their operationalizations of power reflect these two terms. But, the present research offers a less

simplistic view of power differences. Any manager who has the power to punish others has some measure of power, namely coercive power (French & Raven, 1959). Nevertheless, in our studies, having this coercive power did not negate the differences between those who were induced to feel relatively powerful or powerless. These results provide some initial evidence that power differences build incrementally along a continuum, although further research is needed to explore this possibility.

### **Practical Implications**

Managers can shape their employees' behavior by punishing them for those behaviors they wish to discourage and rewarding them for those behaviors they wish to encourage (e.g., Arvey & Jones, 1995). They may also use punishment as a social signal to inform observers about expected standards of behavior and the consequences associated with violating those standards (Butterfield, Treviño, Wade, & Ball, 2005; Treviño, 1992). However, the use of punishment does not come without risks (Baron, 1988). If employees view punishment as inappropriate, it can damage employee morale, managers' reputations, and firm productivity (e.g., Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980; Ball & Sims, 1991; Ball et al., 1994; Butterfield et al., 2005). It is therefore critical that managers punish in ways that are seen by others as appropriate in terms of scope and severity. Our findings indicate that punishing others in ways that are seen as appropriately severe may be challenging because experiencing power changes how people judge the morality of others' behavior.

Because power endows people with a sense of moral clarity, managers possessing more power are inclined to administer more severe punishment. This tendency may be either problematic or functional for the organization. On one hand, it may be problematic if the punishments they administer appear out of line with what casual observers consider appropriate.

If managers wish to mitigate this risk, they could mete out less severe punishment. Alternatively, they might solicit feedback from less powerful people before administering any punishment to ensure that the punishment is not perceived as being overly severe. On the other hand, the fact that powerful people are more willing to punish others could be an advantage for organizations interested in enforcing ethical standards. Powerful people may be more willing to administer a well-deserved punishment than are powerless people because the latter lack the confidence that others have clearly violated an ethical standard.

If powerful people wish to err on the side of caution in administering punishment, given real and meaningful risks (e.g., Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980), they may be able to reduce their inflated sense of moral clarity by considering others' viewpoints. Powerful people tend to be poor perspective takers (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), but they can improve their empathic accuracy by employing tactics that facilitate perspective taking (Galinsky, & Moskowitz, 2000). This enhanced insight could reduce some of the discrepancy between how the powerful and powerless choose to punish others. Conversely, if powerless people wish to increase their willingness to administer more severe forms of punishment, they may face a greater challenge. People in powerless positions tend to be judged more harshly for levying punishment relative to those in more powerful positions (Molm, Quist, & Wisely, 1994).

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Our work has some limitations that should be noted. First, Study 1 measures clarity of moral judgment with regard to behaviors in "right vs. right" moral dilemmas wherein people may and do differ about which course of action is most moral. It did not explore whether power affects moral clarity when moral values are not in conflict. Further, in Study 4 we instructed participants to administer punishments in a laboratory setting, where the stakes were apparently

real, but still relatively low in magnitude. It is possible that powerful managers in actual organizations would lose some sense of moral clarity when their punishment decisions have more substantial consequences. To be sure, making a transgressor engage in a boring task for a fixed amount of time differs from firing someone or pressing criminal charges. As only Study 4 demonstrates that moral clarity mediates the relationship between heightened power and harsher punishment of moral transgressions, replication of these results would be valuable--particularly if they show the effect remains with harsher forms of punishment.

Study 4 was also limited in that we measured the mediator after we measured the dependent variable, which means that our mediation analysis cannot establish temporal precedence. Future studies might examine whether moral clarity truly causes people to punish others more severely for moral transgressions or if the experience of administering severe punishment causes people to reconsider their views of the behavior as cut and dry (i.e., those who administer harsh punishments are motivated to report higher levels of moral clarity to justify their decisions).

Whereas the present research provides support for our hypotheses, there may be specific conditions in which the same results do not appear. For example, a heightened sense of moral clarity might lead powerful people to let others escape punishment altogether if the powerful do not see others' behaviors as moral transgressions. In these cases, those with less power might actually administer as much (or even *greater*) punishment because they harbor lingering doubts about whether ethical boundaries were violated. Another potential boundary condition is whether the punisher may benefit from the transgression. Given that powerful people are more likely to promote their own goals and objectives in making decisions (Gruenfeld, et al., 2008), they may choose to turn a blind eye to unethical behavior if it is in their interest to do so. Further, given

their preference for deontology (Lammers & Stapel, 2009), powerful people may prefer to punish others less severely if the rules established by the organization are relatively lenient. Finally, Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky (2010) provided convincing evidence of moral hypocrisy among the powerful—setting higher standards for others than for themselves. This implies that the link between power and punishment may apply to cases that involve punishing others rather than self-punishment.

Aside from identifying boundary conditions, future research might investigate how the power of the transgressor interacts with the power of the punisher to influence punishment severity. Fragale, Rosen, Xu, and Onypchuk (2009) found that people judge high-status transgressors more harshly and recommend punishing them more severely than low-status transgressors, but what about the influence of the punisher's power? Would more or less powerful punishers be equally punitive toward high-status transgressors? People may be more punitive toward out-group members, which implies that the powerless would be particularly punitive toward the powerful and the powerful would be particularly punitive toward the powerless. Future research should investigate this prediction in order to shed more light on the link between power and punishment.

### *Conclusion*

Punishment serves an important role in organizations because it enables managers to influence the behavior of their employees. While managers strive to administer punishments that others regard as appropriately severe, our research suggests that this task may be more difficult than it seems. The psychological experience of power leads people to punish others more severely because power heightens one's sense of moral clarity--the belief that ethical judgments are straightforward and clear-cut. In short, it appears the powerful are willing to administer

harsher punishments not because they see others' transgressions as more immoral, but because they believe they know an immoral transgression when they see one.



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Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study 2 Variables (N=48)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
1 Moral Clarity	1.00	*										
2 Punishment Extremity	0.55	*	1.00									
3 Imm. Rating Extrem.	0.52	*	0.70	*	1.00							
4 Moral Attentiveness	-0.09	*	0.02		-0.03	1.00						
5 Moral Awareness	0.40	*	0.22		0.28	0.11	1.00					
6 Internalization	0.42	*	0.36	*	0.64	0.19	0.15	1.00				
7 Symbolization	0.05	*	0.25		0.14	0.24	0.19	0.09	1.00			
8 Formalist	0.45	*	0.33	*	0.56	0.00	0.21	0.77	*	0.25	1.00	
9 Utilitarian	0.28		0.39	*	0.43	0.20	0.43	*	0.29	*	0.51	*
10 Deontological	0.05		0.33	*	0.21	0.18	-0.19	0.19	0.33	*	0.34	*
11 Impression Mgmt.	0.10		-0.01		0.04	-0.08	0.03	0.21	-0.32	*	0.02	-0.05
Mean	5.01		4.81		5.28	4.06	4.68	6.06	4.28		6.08	5.26
SD	0.83		1.05		0.84	1.03	0.76	0.95	0.86		0.80	0.92

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2: *Regressing Severity of Punishment on Key Factors in Study 2*

Random Intercept Models					
Dependent Variable	Model 1 Severity of Punishment			Model 2 Severity of Punishment	
	Coefficient			Coefficient	
Fixed Effects					
For Intercept					
Intercept	4.73	***		4.74	***
Moral Clarity	0.19			0.38	*
Internalized Identity				-0.19	
Symbolized Identity				0.10	
Moral Attentiveness				-0.04	
Moral Awareness				-0.16	
Utilitarian				0.21	
Formalist				-0.29	
Deontological				0.29	*
For Immorality					
Rating Slope					
Intercept	1.26	***		0.89	***
Moral Clarity	0.27	**		0.17	**
Random Effects					
	Variance		Variance		
	Component	r <sup>2</sup>	Component	r <sup>2</sup>	
Level 1	1.27	0.03	1.27	0.03	
Level 2	0.38	0.00	0.27	0.29	
Deviance					
	1,070.80		1,072.83		
$\chi^2$	138.66	***	94.27	***	
Reliability Estimate	0.68		0.60		

† p &lt; .10 \* p &lt; .05, \*\* p &lt; .01, \*\*\* p &lt; .001

Power Clarity Punishment

Table 3

*Experiment 4 Means by Condition (SD in Parentheses)*

Condition	Role	N	Interestingness of Task Assigned to Confederate	Moral Clarity	Extremity of Judgment	Power
Immoral	HP	24	4.75 (1.65) <sup>b</sup>	5.28 (1.58) <sup>b</sup>	2.27 (1.19) <sup>b</sup>	4.96 (1.08) <sup>a</sup>
	LP	25	5.70 (1.35) <sup>a</sup>	4.30 (1.91) <sup>a</sup>	2.68 (1.58) <sup>b</sup>	3.76 (1.30) <sup>b</sup>
	Total	49	5.23 (1.56)	4.78 (1.81)	2.48 (1.40)	4.35 (1.33)
Control	HP	26	5.52 (1.35) <sup>ab</sup>	4.28 (1.90) <sup>a</sup>	2.72 (1.09) <sup>b</sup>	4.73 (0.96) <sup>a</sup>
	LP	25	5.02 (1.74) <sup>ab</sup>	4.32 (2.07) <sup>a</sup>	2.41 (1.09) <sup>b</sup>	3.40 (1.87) <sup>b</sup>
	Total	51	5.27 (1.56)	4.30 (1.96)	2.56 (1.09)	4.08 (1.61)
Total	HP	50	5.15 (1.54)	4.76 (1.81)	2.50 (1.15)	4.84 (1.02)
	LP	50	5.36 (1.58)	4.30 (1.97)	2.55 (1.35)	3.58 (1.61)
	Total	100	5.26 (1.56)	4.54 (1.90)	2.53 (1.25)	4.21 (1.48)

*Note: Means within a column with different superscripts are significantly different from one another.*



Power Clarity Punishment

Table 4  
Correlations among Study 4 Variables

*Transgression Condition (N = 49)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Power (i.e., Manager Role)	1.00									
2 Power	-0.46 **	1.00								
3 Interestingness of Task Alloc.	0.30 *	-0.21	1.00							
4 Moral Clarity	-0.28	0.01	-0.30 *	1.00						
5 Imm Rating Extremity	0.15	-0.27	0.18	-0.28	1.00					
6 Moral Attentiveness	0.05	0.03	0.24	-0.17	0.22	1.00				
7 Moral Awareness	0.12	-0.08	-0.09	0.15	-0.09	-0.05	1.00			
8 Internalization	-0.21	0.20	0.13	0.29 *	-0.11	-0.03	-0.13	1.00		
9 Symbolization	-0.34 *	0.09	-0.06	0.25	0.01	0.22	0.08	0.40 **	1.00	
10 Deontological	0.20	-0.07	-0.04	-0.11	0.07	0.00	0.05	-0.13	-0.11	1.00
Mean		4.35	5.23	4.78	2.48	4.13	3.89	5.83	4.42	4.78
SD		1.33	1.56	1.81	1.40	0.93	0.59	0.99	1.13	0.72

Power Clarity Punishment

*Control Condition (N = 51)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Power (i.e., Manager Role)	1.00									
2 Power	-0.42 **	1.00								
3 Interestingness of Task Alloc.	-0.16	0.04	1.00							
4 Moral Clarity	0.01	0.21	-0.01	1.00						
5 Imm Rating Extremity	-0.14	-0.03	0.16	-0.43 **	1.00					
6 Moral Attentiveness	0.06	0.06	-0.28 *	0.12	-0.11	1.00				
7 Moral Awareness	0.17	0.09	-0.31 *	0.36 **	-0.39 **	0.18	1.00			
8 Internalization	0.23	-0.16	-0.09	0.02	-0.12	0.20	0.16	1.00		
9 Symbolization	0.25	-0.15	-0.15	-0.07	0.11	-0.02	-0.01	0.21	1.00	
10 Deontological	0.09	-0.14	0.06	0.05	-0.18	0.04	0.11	0.36 **	-0.11	1.00
Mean		4.08	5.27	4.30	2.56	4.04	4.05	6.08	4.40	4.93
SD		1.61	1.56	1.96	1.09	1.05	0.45	0.78	1.16	0.74

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5

*Study 4: Regressing Severity of Punishment on Key Variables in transgression condition (n = 49)*

Variable	Model 1 Severity of Punishment	Model 2 Severity of Punishment	Beta
Powerful Role (i.e., Manager Role)	-0.33 *	-0.31 *	
Moral Clarity	-0.13	-0.12	
Powerful by Moral Clarity	0.36 *	0.43 **	
Extremity of Immorality Judgment	0.08	0.06	
Moral Attentiveness		0.30 *	
Moral Awareness		0.05	
Internalization		0.29 †	
Symbolization		-0.19	
Deontological		0.05	
R-squared			0.39

† p < 0.10 ; \*\* p < 0.01 ; \* p < 0.05

Figure 1

*Study 2: Punishment Severity by Moral Clarity and Perceived Immorality of Transgression*

