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## **The (Income-Adjusted) Price of Good Behavior: Documenting the Counter-Intuitive, Wealth-Based Moral Judgment Gap**

Drew S. Weiner and Sean M. Laurent

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# The (Income-Adjusted) Price of Good Behavior: Documenting the Counter-Intuitive, Wealth-Based Moral Judgment Gap

Drew S. Weiner and Sean M. Laurent  
University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign

Poor people are punished more frequently and more severely than are wealthy people for their transgressions, suggesting that an agent's wealth affects how they are morally evaluated. To our knowledge, this has not been tested empirically. An initial study found that people expect the poor to be judged more harshly than the wealthy. Several other experiments consistently found that the reverse was true: Poor targets were judged as less immoral than wealthy targets for the same moral violations. Explanations of this wealth-based moral judgment gap were explored, including differences in descriptive/prescriptive expectations, global anti-wealthy or pro-poor biases, and differences in how people understand and explain the behavior of wealthy and poor moral transgressors. Although the moral judgment gap is likely multiply determined, poor targets were consistently viewed as having better reasons than the wealthy to act badly. Thus, the immoral behavior of poor targets was attributed to situational factors and was discounted, whereas wealthy targets' behavior was perceived as less excusable and was attributed primarily to bad moral character. A final study extended our findings to the domain of prosocial behavior. Consistent with a reasons-based explanation, poor targets were viewed as having better moral character than wealthy targets when their behavior benefitted others, and wealthy targets were viewed as having more extrinsic reasons to behave prosocially.

*Keywords:* moral judgment, person perception, social cognition, wealth, socioeconomic status

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... [T]he love of money is the root of all evil.—1 Timothy 6:10 KJV

The lack of money is the root of all evil.—George Bernard Shaw


The United States has the highest number of prisoners per capita in the world (BBC News, 2005), and the people in those prisons are mostly the nation's poorest citizens. For example, in the recent past, the annual median income of inmates in state prisons prior to incarceration was \$19,185, which is 41% lower than the income of similarly aged, nonincarcerated individuals (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). Looney and Turner (2018) examined the earnings of approximately 2.9 million U.S. prisoners and found that 86% of their sample earned less than \$15,000 annually in the 3 years preceding

incarceration, with 56% of this subsample earning less than \$500 annually. Laws even criminalize poverty at times, rendering activities such as sleeping outside, panhandling, and offering food to the homeless illegal (The National Coalition for the Homeless & The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2006).

In contrast, serious and highly publicized crimes committed by the wealthy frequently result in little if any punishment. For example, only a single Wall Street executive has been convicted to 30 months in prison for contributing to the global economic collapse in 2008 (Eisinger, 2014). As another example, in the 2013 trial of a 16-year-old who killed four pedestrians while driving drunk, the defense claimed the defendant suffered from "affluenza." That is, because of his privileged upbringing, they argued he did not fully understand the consequences of his actions and should not be punished for them. The prosecution asked that the defendant be sentenced to 20 years in prison. The defense prevailed: His punishment was 10 years' probation (Klass & Valiente, 2015). This case has been compared with that of a poor juvenile immigrant tried for a similar crime, who was treated as an adult and given the maximum sentence of 20 years in prison (Merchant, 2016).

The U.S. legal system thus appears quick to punish the poor and slow to serve justice to the wealthy. But do these legal trends parallel how laypeople form judgments regarding moral transgressions committed by poor and wealthy people? The present research begins to address this question. An initial study asked participants how the poor and wealthy would be judged for committing the same generic moral transgression. Next, a series of studies using a

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 Drew S. Weiner and Sean M. Laurent, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.

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Data and study materials are available at [osf.io/jaq4w](https://osf.io/jaq4w).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Drew S. Weiner, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, 603 East Daniel Street, Champaign, IL 61820. E-mail: [drewsw2@illinois.edu](mailto:drewsw2@illinois.edu)

variety of methods compared moral judgments of wealthy and poor agents who committed the same crimes. A final study examined perceptions of praiseworthy acts committed by individuals from the same groups.

### Pro-Wealthy and Anti-Poor Beliefs

To the extent that the wealthy are held in higher esteem than the poor, it would not be surprising for people to judge the poor more harshly than the wealthy for committing the same offenses. Motivational accounts such as just-world theory (Lerner, 1980) and system justification theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) argue that people need to believe the world is fair and that people at the top of society deserve to be there. Consistent with this, in the United States, where social mobility beliefs are particularly strong (Alesina, Stantcheva, & Teso, 2018; American Psychological Association [APA], 2007), the wealthy are viewed as more competent than the poor (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) and as harder working than average Americans (Parker, 2012). Moreover, respondents rate individual characteristics such as industriousness and initiative as more important than the structure of society (e.g., the American economic system or the political influence of the wealthy) in creating wealth disparities (Hunt, 2004). This suggests a widespread belief that the wealthy deserve their financial successes. In comparison, even though structural causes of poverty have been acknowledged (Hunt, 2004), the poor are frequently perceived as responsible for their poverty. Welfare recipients, single mothers, and the able-bodied unemployed are among some of the unlucky groups who are scapegoated for their financial problems (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999; Weiner, 1995). And compared with people from the middle-class, the poor have been rated as lazier, less intelligent, more immoral, violent, criminal, and more likely to abuse drugs or have too many children (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; but see Parker, 2012).

Making matters worse, people from lower-status groups tend to be codefenders of the status quo, even when this harms personal or ingroup interests (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost et al., 2004). For example, they endorse negative stereotypes about their own groups but accept positive stereotypes about higher-status outgroups (e.g., Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). This helps maintain exploitative social hierarchies in multiple ways. People from higher-status groups are hostile toward outsiders, and people from lower-status groups internalize negative stereotypes about themselves and esteem members of higher status groups (e.g., Brewer & Campbell, 1976; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). This pattern is also found using less direct measures. For example, darker skinned, lower status Chilean *morenos* implicitly favor lighter skinned, higher status *blancos* (Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002), just as African American students display more positive implicit attitudes toward European American students (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002).

In fact, when status gaps between groups widen, robust, system-justifying effects grow stronger. In a study comparing levels of implicit, anti-ingroup bias among different low-status and minority groups (e.g., Jews, overweight individuals), poor individuals showed the strongest levels of ingroup derogation, reflecting the wide status gap between the wealthy and poor (Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002). Other work has even found that people implicitly favor the wealthy over the middle class (Horwitz & Dovi-

dio, 2017), despite explicit measures suggesting the opposite (e.g., Fiske et al., 2002).

To the extent that the poor are regarded more negatively than are the wealthy, and considering that the poor are more likely to be punished for their moral infractions, it seems possible that moral judgments of these groups will follow a similar pattern, with poor agents being judged more harshly for committing the same moral transgressions as wealthy agents. However, there are also compelling reasons to believe the opposite will be the case, even if this runs counter to lay expectations.

### Potential Sources of an Anti-Wealthy or Pro-Poor Moral Judgment Gap

If the wealthy are esteemed more than the poor, this general positivity in evaluation might spill over into other domains (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), such as a belief that the wealthy are particularly moral. In this case, wealthy targets who violate moral rules might be judged especially harshly because their behavior deviates substantially from expectations (i.e., expectancy violation; e.g., Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987). Similarly, if the poor are expected to act immorally—particularly when their reasons for doing so are salient—the standards against which they are judged might be considerably relaxed, and single instances of bad behavior might be discounted (e.g., Kelley, 1973).

However, people often have ambivalent feelings about social groups that include a mix of positive and negative stereotypes, such as the beliefs some hold that women are both virtuous and duplicitous (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001; see also Glick & Fiske, 1999). Thus, although the wealthy are perceived as “better” in some domains, there may be little overlap between those traits on which they are seen positively (e.g., “industrious”) and other traits such as moral character. For example, although the wealthy are considered competent, they are also perceived as cold (e.g., Fiske et al., 1999, 2002), which shares conceptual features with immorality (Abele et al., 2016; Landy, Piazza, & Goodwin, 2016). In addition, Americans view the wealthy as greedier and as less honest than average people (Parker, 2012), which may contribute to perceptions of immorality.

Although little work has examined beliefs about the moral character of the wealthy, some research has suggested that wealth is in reality associated with less ethical and more selfish behavior (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015; Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012). However, other work suggests the opposite. For example, it has been shown that the wealthy are likelier to donate money and time to charity and to behave generously in noncompetitive economic games (Korndörfer, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2015; Schmukle, Korndörfer, & Egloff, 2019; Smeets, Bauer, & Gneezy, 2015; von Hermann & Tutić, 2019). Regardless of any actual links between wealth and pro-social behavior, it seems unlikely that wealthy people will be perceived as more generous (and by extension, moral) than poor people because charitable behavior such as donating money requires less self-sacrifice for the wealthy than the poor, and thus may seem less diagnostic of underlying moral character (see Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015). Consistent with this, when people are given larger starting endowments in public goods games, they are expected to contribute more to the

public good (Hauser, Hilbe, Chatterjee, & Nowak, 2019). Furthermore, moral and immoral behaviors are not mutually exclusive (e.g., donating to charity while underpaying employees) and may be evaluated using different criteria, and it is possible that wealthy people tend to engage more in both. If so, past moral behavior may have little bearing on judgments of present immorality.

To the extent that the wealthy are viewed as particularly immoral, a single instance of a suspected behavioral trait (e.g., an immoral act) could provide sufficient evidence to attribute that trait confidently (i.e., expectancy confirmation; e.g., Biernat, Ma, & Nario-Redmond, 2008). That is, it takes less evidence to confirm preexisting beliefs than to form new ones, and perceivers tend to see even ambiguous behavior as confirming prior expectations (e.g., Anderson, 2010; Epley & Kruger, 2005). Moreover, because people believe that powerful people (e.g., the wealthy) should behave morally (e.g., Hu, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2016), it is unlikely that their bad behavior would be discounted.

Another reason the wealthy might be judged more harshly is that even though people prefer high-status targets in some domains (e.g., Jost et al., 2004), the wealthy are envied (Fiske et al., 2002; see, Fiske, 2018, for a review) and resented (Piston, 2014). Because of this, perceivers might be especially willing or even eager to judge wealthy targets negatively when they do something wrong, in the same way they feel pleasure when envied or resented targets suffer misfortune (Feather, 1989; Feather & Sherman, 2002).

One last reason to expect that wealthy targets will be perceived as more immoral than poor targets for committing the same moral violations is that people may struggle to understand why a wealthy person would behave immorally, given their many advantages in life. That is, people frequently explain intentional behavior using reasons (e.g., Malle, 1999), and when confronted with immoral behavior from a wealthy target, the most easily accessible reason might be that the target is immoral. For poor targets, different sorts of reasons for bad behavior might be more salient. To the extent that these perceived reasons are external, situational, and do not involve targets' stable attributes, transgressions should be judged more leniently (e.g., Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Woolfolk, Doris, & Darley, 2006). This is consistent with theory arguing that statistically infrequent immoral acts are perceived as more diagnostic of immoral character (Uhlmann et al., 2015). Relatedly, although high-status targets are given the benefit of the doubt relative to low-status targets for ambiguous moral transgressions (i.e., when it is unclear whether a moral violation occurred; Polman, Pettit, & Wiesenfeld, 2013), poverty may provide need-based excuses or justifications for certain common types of bad behavior such as theft, increasing the perceived likelihood that a poor person would transgress in particular ways but simultaneously decreasing the influence of bad behavior on moral judgments.

Even beyond need-based transgressions, the poor might be excused more than the wealthy for other types of transgressions because people are probably aware that the poor experience stresses the wealthy are able to avoid. For example, aside from ever-present threats of food insecurity and homelessness that the wealthy do not face, the poor are more likely to be victims of crimes than the wealthy (Larsson, 2006). In addition, poor people, including poor children, have greater exposure to pollution, crowding, crime, family turmoil, and violence than the wealthy. Early

life poverty and associated adversity have been shown to affect both diurnal regulation and acute stress responsiveness of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis in ways that promote later mental health problems (e.g., Blair, Berry, Mills-Koonce, Granger, & the FLP Investigators, 2013; Kern & Laurent, 2019; Laurent et al., 2014; Lupien, King, Meaney, & McEwen, 2001) and can have permanent impacts on brain development and adult functioning (Blair & Raver, 2016; Evans, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 2011). Related to this, lower-status moral transgressors may receive more sympathy, resulting in more lenient moral judgments of unambiguous moral transgressions (Polman et al., 2013). In contrast, the wealthy lead easier lives than the poor, experiencing more contentment (Piff & Moskowitz, 2018) and enjoying life expectancies up to 15 years higher than their poorest conationals (Dickman, Himmelstein, & Woolhandler, 2017). This suggests that several types of external attributions—such as financial need and chronic stress—should compete with character-based explanations in explaining poor targets' moral violations.

Of course, more than one process could be in operation at the same time. For example, higher prescriptive standards for the wealthy could promote greater outrage when they fail to meet these standards; preexisting (descriptive) beliefs about each group could lead to readier confirmation that a wealthy person's behavior and character is quite bad relative to that of a poor person; dislike of the wealthy could lead to them being judged harshly; and a belief that poor targets have reasons to behave badly that the wealthy lack could lead to different attributions for behavior and exaggerate evaluative differences.

## The Present Research

The studies presented here demonstrate that a moral judgment gap exists between the wealthy and poor, and that the direction of this gap runs counter to what many people would expect. An initial study documents laypeople's expectation that the poor would be judged more harshly than the wealthy for committing the same generic moral transgression. Subsequent experiments show that the reverse is true. Studies 2A and 2B used a moral transgression involving money (and deception), as this domain seemed particularly likely to reveal differences in moral judgment. Study 2A used a free-response format in addition to traditional rating scales to explore how participants explained the transgression in their own words. In Study 2B, a repeated-measures design was used to examine whether wealth-based differences in judgment for a financial transgression would persist when financial need was diminished and whether differences in moral judgment were driven by greater leniency toward poor targets or greater harshness toward wealthy targets. This study allowed us to initially probe whether expectancy violation versus confirmation appeared to be in operation. Study 3 took a different approach, exploring whether a difference in moral judgment for a nonfinancial transgression (i.e., beating up a stranger) would emerge only when a financial motivation was available to explain the behavior. To more directly test expectancy violation, expectancy confirmation, and reason-based accounts, Studies 4A through 4C explored differences in moral standards, expectations, descriptive stereotypes, liking, and perceived adequacy of reasons for bad behavior. In addition, Studies 4A through 4C replicated the moral judgment gap found in Studies 2A through 3 and extended this pattern to include other,



more minor violations. Study 5 tested our theorized reasons-based account using a between-participants response latency task, measuring how quickly participants decided that a moral violation was informative about poor and wealthy targets' moral character. Study 6 reversed the causal ordering to test whether a more abstract reason—chronic stress—would indirectly predict moral judgments for a new and minor moral violation by influencing perceptions of wealth. A final study extended our findings to the domain of praise. We hypothesized a reversal from earlier studies, expecting that participants would be more surprised by a poor individual's charity but would attribute a wealthy person's largesse to external factors (e.g., praise-seeking, tax relief) and consequently judge poor donors more positively than wealthy ones.

## General Method

### Open Practices and Data

All measures, manipulations, and exclusions in all studies are disclosed. Sample sizes were determined a priori with the intention of recruiting enough participants to have 80% power to detect small- to medium-sized effects (e.g.,  $f \geq .25$ ,  $d \geq 0.25$ ).<sup>1</sup> Based on sensitivity analyses, sample sizes were sufficient to detect effect sizes between  $d = 0.27$  (Study 5) and  $d = 0.51$  (Study 2A). No data were analyzed until target sample sizes were reached. Data for all studies, coding instructions, experimental instructions, and stimuli (including verbatim wording of all materials and measures), and supplementary data is available in the online supplemental material.

### Participants and Procedure

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the university where the research was carried out. In all experiments, participants consented to participate and were asked to pay close attention to the stories and questions that followed. Assignment to experimental condition was always random, and except where noted, primary dependent variables were always presented in individualized random orders. At the end of each study (except Studies 1 and 6), participants provided demographic information (summarized in the following text).

Participants' data were excluded from analyses if they responded incorrectly to one or more attention checks (total  $n = 80$  [2.39%] across all experiments), or if they failed to respond to all measures in an experiment ( $n = 63$ ). With few exceptions (described in the relevant studies), analyses that retained these participants did not differ substantively from those reported herein. In the few cases where a participant participated in more than one experiment ( $n = 38$ ), responses were retained only for the first study completed. After making these exclusions, final sample sizes were  $n = 301$  (Study 1),  $n = 124$  (Study 2A),  $n = 202$  (Study 2B),  $n = 198$  (Study 3),  $n = 573$  (Study 4A),  $n = 314$  (Study 4B),  $n = 312$  (Study 4C),  $n = 429$  (Study 5),  $n = 406$  (Study 6), and  $n = 254$  (Study 7). All experiments (excluding Study 1) were between participants.

Participants were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk and were paid a small sum for participating. All were U.S. residents and the samples included people from all 50 U.S. states (52.2% female,  $M_{\text{Age}} = 36.58$ ,  $SD_{\text{Age}} = 12.01$ ). Participants identified as

European American (74.2%), African American (7.5%), Asian American (7.5%), Hispanic (6.4%), Native American or Pacific Islander (0.7%), and other (1.8%).<sup>2</sup> Most participants (96.5%) reported English as their first language, and all but three participants reported speaking English for at least 4 years. The sample identified as somewhat liberal ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) in response to the question, "Where would you place yourself on the following ideological spectrum?" (1 = *extremely liberal*, 4 = *middle of the road*, 7 = *extremely conservative*). Studies 2A through 5 and Study 7 asked the following questions: "Where would you place yourself on the following socioeconomic spectrum?" (1 = *lower class*, 2 = *working class*, 3 = *lower middle class*, 4 = *middle class*, 5 = *upper-middle class*, 6 = *upper class*;  $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) and "Which of the following best describes your personal finances?" (1 = *very poor*, 7 = *very wealthy*;  $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ).<sup>3</sup> Thus, although there was variability in sample characteristics, further research would be required to enhance our ability to generalize to other populations (e.g., in different countries or locations with different cultural or economic conditions than in the United States).

### Study 1

Study 1 examined lay predictions about the effects of target wealth on moral judgment (i.e., people's predictions for how the poor and wealthy would be relatively judged for their moral violations). Because most people have access to commonly held negative stereotypes about poor individuals (e.g., Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske et al., 2002) and likely have some understanding of the relationship between poverty and incarceration (see Looney & Turner, 2018), we hypothesized that participants would expect the poor to be judged as more immoral than the wealthy for committing the same generic immoral act, reflecting the apparent moral judgment disparity in the U.S. legal system.

### Method

Participants rated their agreement with both versions of two statements: "For doing something 'bad,' a (wealthy or poor) person would be judged as more immoral than a (poor or wealthy) person" (response range: 1 = *totally disagree*, 5 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 9 = *totally agree*) and "Relative to a (wealthy or poor) person who does something bad/immoral, a (poor or wealthy) person would be judged \_\_\_\_\_ for doing the same bad/immoral thing" (response options: 1 = *as much more immoral*, 3 = *as somewhat more immoral*, 5 = *no differently*, 7 = *as somewhat less immoral*, 9 = *as much less immoral*). After appropriate reverse scoring, all items were averaged ( $\alpha = .81$ ) so that scores  $<5$  indicated beliefs that the poor would be judged as more immoral than the wealthy and scores  $>5$  indicated the reverse.

<sup>1</sup> After conducting a pilot test (reported in the online supplemental material), we believed that wealthy-poor differences in moral judgment would generally be associated with medium-to-large effect sizes. However, Studies 4A through 6 examined other types of effects and dependent measures (e.g., general impressions of wealthy/poor people; response latencies), suggesting we should recruit larger samples to detect potentially smaller effects.

<sup>2</sup> Information about racial/ethnic identity was not collected in Study 5.

<sup>3</sup> For Studies 2B and 5, 1 = *very poor* and 6 = *very wealthy* ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ).

## Results and Discussion

A single-sample  $t$  test against the scale midpoint of five revealed that on average, participants believed that a poor person would be judged as more immoral than a wealthy person for committing the same generic transgression ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ),  $t(300) = 8.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.48$ .<sup>4</sup> This highlights the novelty of the basic finding we present in subsequent experiments. That is, participants believed the poor would be judged more negatively than the wealthy for the same moral violation. Yet, people's actual judgments contradict lay predictions.

### Studies 2A and 2B

Study 2A provided an initial test of whether a wealthy agent would be judged more harshly than a poor agent for not returning money to a coworker who had lost it. Prescriptively, any person in this situation would be expected to return the money. However, people might perceive poverty as providing an exculpatory reason for not doing so, such as if they view the person as only having acted this way because need overcame their better nature. A wealthy person would have no obvious external justification for this behavior, increasing the likelihood that people would make a dispositional attribution. We therefore expected that relative to a poor target, participants would judge a wealthy target more harshly for this transgression and would view this transgression as stemming more from immoral character. Prior to providing responses on traditional rating scales, participants were asked to explain in their own words why the agent behaved as he did, allowing us to explore how participants explained the agents' behavior without constraining them to respond in any particular way.

Study 2B did not use a free-response format. Instead, it introduced an additional manipulation that varied need by either providing no information about indebtedness (i.e., control) or describing agents as debt-free and financially responsible, to examine whether lowered need would reduce or eliminate the hypothesized effect. In addition, a repeated-measures design was used where moral judgments were first measured after debt information and the transgression were described and then again after wealth information was provided. This allowed us to directly examine whether differences in judgment were a result of increased leniency for the poor target, increased negativity toward for the wealthy target, or both.<sup>5</sup>

## Method

In Study 2A, participants were randomly assigned to read about John, described as either one of the (wealthiest or poorest) people in his town, who worked long hours every week (managing a company he inherited from his father or at several part-time jobs). In both conditions, John was described as born into his financial situation. Participants then read that John found an envelope containing about \$3,000 cash in the elevator at his workplace and kept it. The following week, one of John's coworkers told him she had misplaced an envelope full of cash that she needed to buy a used car after hers had been wrecked. John lied, telling her he had not seen the money and wishing her luck in her search.

In Study 2B, participants read about John committing the same transgression as in Study 2A. However, prior to this, participants

were first randomly assigned to either receive no debt information (control) or to read that he had no outstanding debts because he skillfully managed his personal finances and "never spent more than he had" (low-debt condition). After making initial judgments, participants learned that John was either "actually quite wealthy," with access to many luxuries (although most money was in long-term investments and therefore inaccessible) or was "actually quite poor" and had difficulty affording basic items, much less luxuries. Participants then responded again to the same questions they answered after Part 1.

**Free responses (Study 2A).** After reading about the target, participants explained his action in their own words by responding to the prompt, "List up to five words that describe why John did what he did (i.e., keeping the money instead of returning it to his coworker)." Responses were not forced or character limited, and many participants gave responses longer than five words. Because a single participant could give multiple responses with different meanings to the prompt, multiple-word responses were divided into separate codable entries using two rules. If a response was a list of multiple words (e.g., *needy, poor, desperate, selfish, mean*), each word was coded separately. If a response included more than one clause containing a subject and a verb (e.g., "because he's selfish, he wasn't raised right"), clauses were coded separately. This method yielded a total of 435 entries (213 in the poor condition). On average, participants generated 3.5 entries each, regardless of experimental condition,  $t(122) = 0.10$ ,  $p = .917$ . Participants' original spelling, capitalization, and so forth was maintained for coding.

Next, seven coders blind to study details were randomly assigned to independently code entries from the wealthy (three coders) or poor (four coders) conditions. Coders noted if responses did not answer the prompt (e.g., "He stole the money") or if they directly referenced wealth (e.g., "He did it because he was poor"), and they did not code these responses on other dimensions. If any coder indicated that an entry referenced wealth, it was removed from subsequent analyses (34 entries in the poor condition, four in the wealthy condition). Following these exclusions, if at least two coders indicated that an entry answered the prompt, it was retained for analyses. Ultimately, 385 entries (167 in the poor condition) generated from 100 unique participants (37 from the poor condition) were coded.

Responses were coded on two 3-point scales. Valence codes measured whether responses represented a negative evaluation (e.g., *greedy, jerk*) or one that was essentially prosocial and positive (e.g., *He stole to provide for his family*; 1 = *positive/prosocial*, 2 = *mixed/unclear/in between*, 3 = *negative/antisocial*). Situation-person codes (e.g., Heider, 1958) measured whether situation or person attributions were given for the agent's behavior (1 = *situation*, 2 = *mixed/unclear/in between*, 3 = *person*). Situation referenced the agent's circumstances (e.g., John

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this article, we report directional statistics and effect sizes (e.g.,  $t$  and  $d$ ) as absolute values.

<sup>5</sup> Because a large proportion of crimes in the United States are financial crimes (see FBI.gov, 2017), an additional experiment (reported only in the online supplemental material) again manipulated need along with wealth, using a different approach and a less consequential financial transgression. Results of that experiment were entirely consistent with those reported here.

needed the money), background (e.g., John was poor growing up), or other people (e.g., John has a newborn), and personal referenced his personality (e.g., greedy) or desires (e.g., John wanted to grow his savings). Interrater reliability was adequate (poor condition: valence  $\alpha = .90$ , person–situation  $\alpha = .88$ ; wealthy condition: valence  $\alpha = .73$ , person–situation  $\alpha = .66$ ).

**Measures (Study 2A).** Next, participants responded to the following series of questions, presented in individualized random orders: immoral character ( $r = .57$ )—"What kind of person is John?" (1 = *John is an immoral person*, 7 = *John is a moral person*; reverse-scored) and "How selfish is John?" (1 = *not at all selfish*, 7 = *very selfish*); immoral action ( $r = .25$ )—"How wrong was it for John to take and keep the money?" (1 = *not at all wrong*, 7 = *completely wrong*) and "How immoral or moral was John's action?" (1 = *completely immoral*, 7 = *completely moral*; reverse-scored)<sup>6</sup>; punishment—"How much punishment does John deserve for his actions (i.e., lying and stealing)?" (1 = *no punishment*, 7 = *severe punishment*); guilt—"How guilty do you think John felt about what he did?" (1 = *not at all guilty*, 7 = *very guilty*); reason—"If you had to guess, do you think John had a good reason to take and keep the money?" (1 = *definitely not*, 7 = *definitely yes*); surprise—"How surprised are you that John took and kept the money?" (1 = *not at all surprised*, 7 = *very surprised*).

**Measures (Study 2B).** Measures collected before and after the presentation of wealth information were the same, except for one item only included before wealth information was presented: "If you had to guess, how wealthy do you think John is compared with most people in his community?" (1 = *John is poorer than most people*, 7 = *John is wealthier than most people*); immoral character ( $r = .53$ )—"What kind of person is John?" (1 = *John is an immoral person*, 7 = *John is a moral person*; reverse-scored) and "How greedy is John?" (1 = *not at all greedy*, 7 = *very greedy*); immoral action ( $r = .25$ )<sup>7</sup>—"How wrong were John's actions?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *completely*) and "How immoral or moral were John's actions?" (1 = *completely immoral*, 7 = *completely moral*; reverse-scored); guilt ( $r = .45$ )—"How guilty do you think John felt about what he did?" and "How bad do you think John felt after learning the money belonged to his co-worker?" (1 = *not at all guilty/not bad at all*, 7 = *very guilty/very bad*); blame—"How much blame does John deserve for what he did?" (1 = *none*, 7 = *maximum*); reason ( $\alpha = .66$ )—"Do you think John had a good reason to take and keep the money?" (1 = *definitely not*, 7 = *definitely yes*), "Did John need to take the money from his co-worker?" (1 = *definitely not*, 7 = *definitely yes*), and "Was John's behavior unjustifiable or justifiable?" (1 = *completely unjustifiable*, 7 = *completely justifiable*). Punishment, anger, and surprise were measured using the same items as in Study 2A.

## Results

**Free responses (Study 2A).** Poverty was cited more than wealth as a reason for the agent's behavior; 34 responses directly referenced the poor agent's finances, and only 4 responses mentioned wealth in the wealthy agent condition,  $\chi^2(1) = 27.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .25$ . It should be emphasized that if a single coder indicated that an entry referenced wealth, it was not included in valence or situation–person analyses. Despite these exclusions, participants in the wealthy condition made significantly more

negative ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ) and person-based ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 0.31$ ) attributions than participants in the poor condition (valence  $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ; situation–person  $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ), respectively,  $t(383) = 11.61$  and  $11.30$ ,  $ps < .001$ ,  $ds = 1.14$  and  $1.11$ . Suggesting that both ratings were capturing the same underlying construct, more negative reasons were also more person-based ( $r = .84$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Considering that poverty itself was cited as a reason for the poor agent's action, combined with the idea that attributing an antisocial act to an actor's situation can excuse the act and make it seem less diagnostic of immoral character (see Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Davis, 1965; Uhlmann et al., 2015; Woolfolk et al., 2006), it is not surprising that greater situational attributions for the poor agent's actions also reflected a less negative view of the agent.

**Scale items (Study 2A).** Relative to the poor agent on all measures, participants rated the wealthy agent as more immoral and deserving of punishment, as feeling less guilty, and as having acted in ways that were more immoral and surprising.<sup>8</sup> Table 1 provides all condition-based means, standard deviations, test statistics, and effect sizes.<sup>9</sup>

**Scale items (Study 2B).** Participants believed the low-debt target ( $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) was wealthier than the unspecified-debt target ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $t(200) = 5.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.81$ . This is not particularly surprising because staying out of debt implies having at least enough resources to afford basic necessities. However, the means in both conditions were near the scale midpoint, suggesting that debt information did not strongly imply poverty or wealth.

Next, we calculated difference scores by subtracting participants' prewealth responses from their postwealth responses, such that positive/negative difference scores respectively indicate increases/decreases in the measured constructs pre- to post-. This approach was used because difference scores are easily interpretable and with two measurements, the approach is statistically similar to using a mixed analysis of variance. Difference scores were analyzed using 2 (wealthy vs. poor)  $\times$  2 (no debt vs. unspecified debt) analyses of variance (ANOVAs). As can be seen in Figure 1, significant main effects of wealth ( $ps < .001$ ) were found for every variable. However, no main effects for debt condition emerged ( $ps > .15$ ), suggesting that financial need alone was not associated with overall differences in judgments.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, only one interaction between debt and wealth conditions emerged, on participants' self-reported anger,  $F(1, 198) = 7.13$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . The direction of the effect was the same across

<sup>6</sup> Because of the low correlation between the two immoral action items, analyses were also conducted on each item separately. Results were entirely consistent with those reported.

<sup>7</sup> Because of the low correlation between the two immoral action items, analyses were also conducted on each item separately. Results were entirely consistent with those reported.

<sup>8</sup> These effects remained significant, as did those of all other experiments reported here, when controlling for participants' self-reported wealth and social class (when measured). Related analyses are presented in the online supplemental material.

<sup>9</sup> Correlations among all dependent measures in each study are provided in the online supplemental material.

<sup>10</sup> Exploratory analyses were conducted to test if the debt manipulation had any effect on participants' pre-wealth responses. The only significant findings were greater surprise by the no-debt target's behavior ( $p < .001$ ) and a belief that the same target deserved more punishment ( $p = .015$ ).



Table 1  
Effects of Wealth Condition on Moral Judgments in Study 2A

Judgment	Poor <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Wealthy <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i> (122)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Immoral character	5.03 (1.25)	6.48 (0.74)	7.83	<.001	1.41
Immoral action	5.80 (1.09)	6.42 (0.96)	3.36	.001	0.60
Punishment	4.33 (1.56)	5.52 (1.31)	4.64	<.001	0.83
Guilt	4.33 (1.85)	2.92 (1.89)	4.19	<.001	0.75
Reason	4.44 (1.83)	1.62 (1.08)	10.49	<.001	1.88
Surprise	3.39 (1.80)	4.97 (1.98)	4.64	<.001	0.84

conditions but was stronger in the unspecified debt condition ( $p < .001$ ) than in the no-debt condition ( $p = .083$ ).

Next, we examined whether difference scores significantly differed from zero within wealth conditions. In the poor condition, all difference scores were significantly different from 0 ( $ps \leq .017$ ,  $ds > 0.24$ ), indicating greater leniency after participants learned the target was poor. In the wealthy condition, all but one difference score (surprise) was significantly different from 0 (other  $ps \leq .001$ ,  $ds > 0.33$ ), consistent with greater moral condemnation after wealth information was provided.

## Discussion

Studies 2A and 2B supported the notion that economic transgressions committed by wealthy and poor people are evaluated in fundamentally different ways. In Study 2A, convergent evidence for this conclusion emerged in participants' free responses to a prompt that asked them to explain why the agent acted as he did and also in response to a number of related but conceptually distinct variables (e.g., moral character vs. morality of actions; e.g., Goodwin, 2015; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Uhlmann, Zhu, & Tannenbaum, 2013). In Study 2B, evidence suggested that

negativity in judgments of poor people is discounted and negativity in judgments of wealthy people is enhanced, relative to judgments made prior to receiving information about the targets' financial status.

Of interest, the descriptively strongest effect size in both studies was for whether targets had a "good reason" to keep the money they found, suggesting that people attributed the targets' behavior to different reasons based on their wealth. As with free responses in Study 2A, perceived reasons for poor targets were probably more external and exonerating, whereas for wealthy targets, the best available reason may have been their immoral character. Consistent with this, the mean for immoral character was near the ceiling for the wealthy target in Study 2A, and the associated effect sizes for this comparison were the second largest in both studies. For poor targets, participants may have discounted the role of character relative to other explanations and attributed behavior more to circumstance (e.g., Kelley, 1972; Uhlmann et al., 2015).

In both studies, people were also relatively more surprised by the wealthy targets' behavior. One of two explanations for this seems likely. If the wealthy are believed to be less immoral than the poor or people in general, an expectancy-violation account

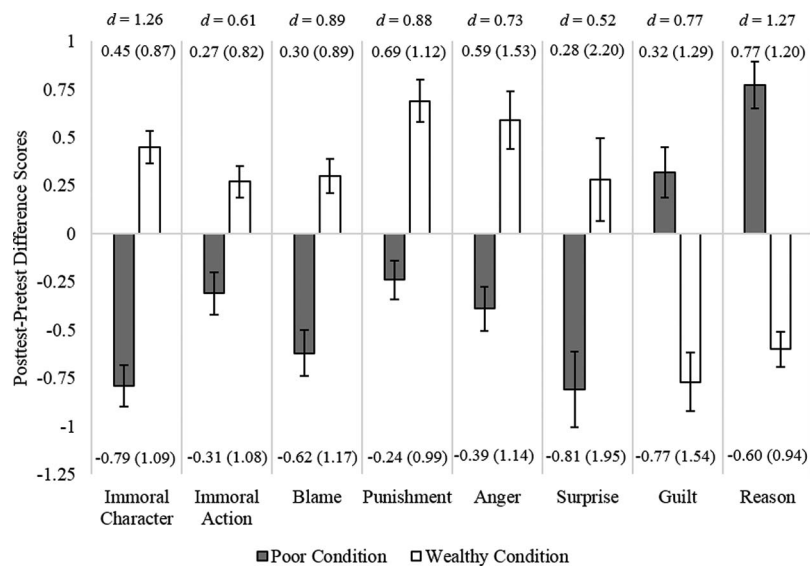


Figure 1. Effects of wealth condition on pre-post moral judgments in Study 2B. Negative and positive difference scores respectively indicate decreases and increases in the measured variables after wealth information was given. All main effects were significant ( $p < .001$ ). Error bars are  $\pm SEM$ . All means (except surprise in the wealthy condition [ $p = .20$ ]) differed significantly from zero using single-sample  $t$  tests ( $ps < .05$ ).



might suggest higher expectations for wealthy targets (i.e., resulting in increased surprise) and lowered expectations for poor targets (e.g., Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Jussim et al., 1987). However, in Study 2B, only a small and nonsignificant increase in surprise was found after participants learned that the wealthy target was wealthy, making this explanation less likely. Alternatively, differences in surprise might have had little to do with prior stereotypes or expectations for the behavior of poor and wealthy people. For wealthy targets, it could have potentially reflected confusion about why they behaved as they did, because they were described as having more than sufficient material resources. For poor targets, the decreased surprise in Study 2B could have reflected that poverty was a salient explanation for this type of bad behavior. We should note that for wealthy targets, an expectancy confirmation account cannot be ruled out as a way of explaining other responses, such as for immoral character. That is, if the wealthy are viewed as particularly immoral (e.g., relative to people in general), a single instance of bad behavior might be enough to confirm this prior belief (Biernat et al., 2008). We explore these possibilities in greater detail in Studies 4A and 4C.

Another notable finding from Study 2B was that evidence for both discounting and intensification of judgments was evident. Negativity in judgments was reduced from baseline when participants found out the transgressor was poor, likely because poverty made an exculpatory reason (i.e., financial need) salient for the poor target's behavior, even if it did not excuse it entirely. Similarly, participants' judgments became even more negative when they learned that the transgressor was wealthy, suggesting that they believed wealthy targets had little reason but bad character to explain the behavior. Consistent with this interpretation, difference scores for "reason" respectively increased and decreased from baseline for poor and wealthy targets.

Although the pattern of data in Study 2B was not consistent with financial need being the sole determinant of the wealth-based moral judgment gap, some limitations should be considered. First, removing need by describing targets as having little debt almost certainly did not negate differences in perceived need across wealth conditions. Although the poor target might not have needed money to pay off debt, such a need might conceivably come at some future point. Similarly, even if the poor target had no immediate need, this does not rule out understandable financial want; living a life filled with long hours of work, no luxuries, and difficulty providing for one's basic needs could provide a motivation for keeping what one has found, perhaps even creating a justification that shifts some of the burden of blame onto the coworker for losing her money. Study 3 therefore addressed the issue of need in a different way, not by trying to remove need, but by creating conditions wherein need was either completely irrelevant to bad behavior or could provide a salient explanation for it.

### Study 3

In Study 3, financial need was again addressed as an explanation for the moral judgment gap by manipulating whether a wealthy or poor agent was offered money for badly beating up a stranger (i.e., a nonfinancial transgression). When done for pay, need should provide a salient explanation for a poor target who engages in this immoral behavior. For a wealthy target, the same explanation makes less sense. For both targets, when done as an uncompen-

sated favor for a friend, this explanation should no longer be salient. Thus, any observed moral judgment gap would be difficult to fully explain using a needs-based reasons account. If the moral judgment gap appears only when agents are offered pay for their violence, a solely needs-based explanation would remain tenable. However, given the results of Study 2A, we expected few or no significant interactions of wealth and compensation. That is, we hypothesized that wealth information would impact dependent variables similarly whether or not a financial motive was present, demonstrating that the judgment gap appears not only for financial misconduct but for a crime of violence, and that differences in financial need would not adequately explain the effect.

### Method

Participants were randomly assigned to one cell of a 2 (wealthy vs. poor)  $\times$  2 (compensated vs. uncompensated) factorial design. Wealthy John worked but received most of his income from a trust fund left by his grandparents and could afford almost any luxury he wanted. Poor John worked several part-time jobs and had difficulty affording even basic necessities. Participants then read that John's friend Tim asked him to beat someone up for him. When compensated, Tim offered (and later paid) John \$500 for this. In the uncompensated condition, nothing was offered in exchange for John's help. In all cases, John beat up Tim's enemy, injuring him severely enough so that he had to spend a night recovering in the hospital.

Participants responded to the following series of questions, presented in individualized random orders: immoral character ( $\alpha = .77$ )—"What kind of person is John? John is a(n) . . ." (1 = *immoral person*, 7 = *moral person*; reverse-scored), "To what extent would you say that John is a violent person?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*), "Do you think John cares about the well-being of other people?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *completely*; reverse-scored), and "Did John mean to put Tim's enemy in the hospital?" (1 = *definitely not*, 7 = *definitely yes*); immoral action ( $\alpha = .70$ )—"How immoral or moral were John's actions?" (1 = *completely immoral*, 7 = *completely moral*; reverse-scored), "How wrong were John's actions?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *completely*), and "How forbidden or permissible were John's actions?" (1 = *completely forbidden*, 7 = *completely permissible*; reverse-scored). Blame, punishment, anger, surprise, and whether John had a good reason to act as he did ( $\alpha = .75$ ) were measured using the same items as in Study 2A, with actions changed to match the new transgression. Guilt was measured using the item, "How guilty do you think John felt about what he did?" (1 = *not at all guilty*, 7 = *very guilty*).

### Results and Discussion

Dependent variables were examined using 2 (wealthy vs. poor)  $\times$  2 (compensated vs. uncompensated) ANOVAs with 1, 194 degrees of freedom. With the exception of immorality of the action ( $F = 1.00$ ,  $p = .319$ ) and reason ( $F = 3.41$ ,  $p = .066$ ), significant main effects of wealth were found on all dependent variables (see Table 2). Although no significant main effects of compensation emerged ( $F_s < 3.32$ ,  $p_s > .070$ ), significant inter-

Table 2  
Effects of Wealth Condition on Moral Judgments in Study 3

Judgment	Poor <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Wealthy <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Immoral character	5.34 (1.26)	5.69 (0.97)	4.85	.029	0.32
Immoral action	6.43 (0.98)	6.55 (0.72)	1.00	.319	0.14
Blame	6.31 (1.10)	6.60 (0.67)	5.19	.024	0.33
Punishment	5.86 (1.25)	6.27 (0.91)	6.80	.010	0.37
Anger	4.68 (1.78)	5.21 (1.52)	5.13	.025	0.32
Guilt	3.73 (1.99)	2.62 (1.68)	19.56	<.001	0.63
Reason	1.86 (1.23)	1.58 (0.83)	3.41	.066	0.26
Surprise	5.38 (1.87)	6.02 (1.41)	7.73	.006	0.40

actions for guilt and surprise did ( $F_s > 5.85$ ,  $ps < .017$ ; immoral character,  $F = 3.49$ ,  $p = .063$ ; other  $ps > .173$ ).<sup>11</sup>

For guilt and surprise, the effects of compensation worked in opposing ways for poor and wealthy targets, leading to harsher judgments for wealthy targets and more lenient judgments for poor targets. People believed the poor target felt more guilty when compensated ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ) than when uncompensated ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ),  $t(194) = 3.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.74$ . In contrast, people thought the wealthy target felt slightly less guilty when compensated ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) than when uncompensated ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ), although this comparison was not significant ( $p = .202$ ). Similarly, participants were slightly more surprised ( $p = .053$ ) when the poor target was uncompensated ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) than when compensated ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ). For the wealthy target, this was reversed: Participants were slightly more surprised ( $p = .141$ ) when he was compensated ( $M = 6.28$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) than when he was not ( $M = 5.78$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ).

The main effects for wealth condition and few interactions with compensation are consistent with the idea that participants discounted their negative judgments of the poor target and strengthened their negative judgments of the wealthy target. For surprise and guilt, this effect was stronger when targets were compensated. Notably, these effects—though descriptively smaller than in Studies 2A and 2B—emerged even though the transgression was quite serious and not finance-related in and of itself. Because the effects of only two variables substantively changed as a function of whether the agents had a financial motive, it appears that for most judgments, compensation did not matter.

Speculatively, irrespective of compensation, the wealthy target may have been perceived as beating up the stranger for amusement or to show off, whereas the poor target may have been perceived as intending to build social capital with his acquaintance or develop a reputation that he is capable of extreme violence (e.g., because some members of poorer communities put less faith in the police for protection; La Vigne, Fontaine, & Dwivedi, 2017). If true, this may have overshadowed the compensation information. Thus, although financial need may provide one form of justification or excuse that mitigates negativity in judgments for poor but not wealthy targets, it is clearly insufficient on its own to explain the moral judgment gap.

### Studies 4A, 4B, and 4C

Studies 4A, 4B, and 4C examined different explanations of the moral judgment gap. All studies included control conditions. Study

4A aimed to find additional evidence for the effects that were found in Studies 2A through 3 using a more abstract and general method, extending the finding using additional transgressions, and more directly examining three potential explanations for the moral judgment gap. Specifically, we examined whether the same transgressions from Studies 2A through 3, along with three new transgressions (minor theft, nonviolent aggressive behavior, and littering), were associated with different prescriptive expectations for people who are poor, wealthy, or of unspecified wealth, also asking whether people from these groups have better or worse reasons to behave in these ways. This allowed us to more directly explore expectancy violation and confirmation explanations in addition to one involving the adequacy of transgressors' perceived reasons for acting badly. Our primary hypothesis was that across all transgressions, participants would judge the wealthy more harshly than the poor and that the wealthy would be perceived as having less adequate reasons for behaving immorally than the poor. We were uncertain whether prescriptive standards for behavior would vary across wealth conditions and did not have any firm hypotheses regarding how judgments of the wealthy and poor would compare to judgments when wealth was unspecified.

Study 4B explored whether, relative to people in general, people strongly dislike the wealthy, strongly like the poor, or neither. If wealthy people in general are strongly disliked, this might help explain why they are judged especially negatively for their transgressions. Similarly, if the poor are especially liked, this could help explain why negativity in judgments of their bad behavior is reduced. For comparison, participants in a separate condition rated their liking of specific targets described as poor, wealthy, or neither, then made the same judgments.

Study 4C turned back to stereotypes, focusing on their descriptive (i.e., rather than prescriptive) content. In addition, because all prior studies (except Study 1) focused on distinct moral violations rather than on more abstract "immorality," Study 4C measured the extent to which poor people, wealthy people, and people in general are stereotyped as immoral, as well as the extent to which each group is perceived as having good reasons for acting immorally. A

<sup>11</sup> When participants who failed attention checks and/or did not respond to all measures were included, the interaction on immoral character was significant,  $F(1, 204) = 4.27$ ,  $p = .040$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ . In the compensated condition, participants rated the wealthy target ( $M = 5.79$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) as more immoral than the poor target ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ )  $t(204) = 3.01$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = 0.58$ . In the uncompensated condition, judgments of wealthy ( $M = 5.57$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and poor targets ( $M = 5.54$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) were not significantly different,  $t(204) = 0.10$ ,  $p = .917$ ,  $d = 0.03$ .

control target comparison condition was again included. Expectancy violation, expectancy confirmation, and reasons-based accounts each predict specific patterns of results. Expectancy violation and confirmation accounts respectively predict that the wealthy would be viewed as less and more immoral than the poor and people in general. An “inadequacy of reasons” account predicts that, regardless of general stereotypes, wealthy people will be perceived as having less adequate reasons to act immorally than nonwealthy people.

## Method

In Study 4A, participants were randomly assigned to make judgments of a person, a wealthy person, or a poor person for committing one of five immoral acts. These acts included strong and weak forms of a financial transgression, an act of nonviolent aggression, and one relatively minor act related to neither domain. The following descriptions were used (in the wealthy and poor conditions, the word *person* was preceded either by *wealthy* or *poor*): Money—“Imagine a person finding \$3,000 in an envelope that a coworker dropped, keeping it for himself, and lying to the coworker about it.” Beating—“Imagine a person beating up a stranger so severely that the stranger had to spend several days in the hospital recovering.” Slashing—“Imagine a person slashing a tire on someone’s car because they cut in front of him and took ‘his’ pump at a gas station.” Stealing—“Imagine a person stealing an inexpensive item from a grocery store because he didn’t feel like waiting in line.” Littering—“Imagine a person throwing a bag of garbage on the street rather than putting it in a nearby trashcan.”

In Studies 4B and 4C, participants were randomly assigned to make judgments in a 2 (target type: general target vs. specific target)  $\times$  3 (wealth: wealthy vs. poor vs. control) between-groups design. In the specific target conditions, participants were provided with descriptions similar to those used in Studies 2 and 3. In Study 4B, participants were asked about the extent to which they like people from each group (or the described people). In Study 4C, judgments involved beliefs about the extent to which people from each group (or the described people) are immoral.

**Measures (Study 4A).** Items were presented in individualized random orders on the same page as the description of the immoral act. Descriptions of the behaviors (e.g., littering) were substituted for [behavior]. For immoral character, adjectives in the second item were matched to immoral acts and are presented in the same order as described above. Four items measured moral judgments of the act ( $\alpha = .91$ ): “If the person you are imagining acted this way, what would you think? If a person [behavior], this behavior would be . . . (1 = *completely acceptable* [easy to excuse, not at all immoral, not at all wrong], 7 = *completely unacceptable* [completely inexcusable, very immoral, very wrong]). Two items measured immoral character ( $r = .60$ ): “If the person you are imagining acted this way, what would you think? If a person [behavior], this person would be . . .” (1 = *not at all immoral* [and, depending on condition: greedy, violent, aggressive, selfish, inconsiderate], 7 = *very immoral* [greedy, violent, aggressive, selfish, inconsiderate]). Higher values indicate harsher moral judgments. For remaining items, participants rated their agreement with the provided statements (1 = *completely disagree* and 7 = *completely agree*). Three items assessed perceived adequacy of targets’ reasons for their behavior ( $\alpha = .69$ ): “A person probably has no good reason

to do this” (reverse-scored), “I can think of good reasons why a person might do this,” and “I can understand why a person might do this.” Three items measured standards for behavior ( $\alpha = .83$ ): “A person could afford to act better than this,” “A person should act with more civility than this,” and “A person ‘should know better’ than to do this.” Higher values indicate better reasons and higher standards.

**Measures (Study 4B).** In the wealthy and poor conditions, the words *person* and *people* were respectively preceded by *wealthy* and *poor*. In the specific target conditions, participants provided their opinions about “John.” Four items measured liking: “In general, I feel \_\_\_\_\_ toward people (John)” (1 = *very cold*, 7 = *very warm*); “In general, I can’t stand people” (“John is the kind of person I can’t stand”; reverse-scored); “In general, I like people” (“John is the kind of person I could see myself liking”); and “I could enjoy being friends with a ‘typical’ person (someone like John)” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; general target  $\alpha = .83$ ; specific target  $\alpha = .85$ ).

**Measures (Study 4C).** In the wealthy and poor conditions, the words *person* and *people* were respectively preceded by *wealthy* and *poor*. In the specific target conditions, participants provided their opinions about “John.” Response scales for all items were 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*. Participants answered the following series of questions: immoral character (general target  $\alpha = .91$ ; specific target  $\alpha = .92$ )—“In general, I think people are immoral” (“John is probably an immoral person”); “People often behave in immoral ways” (“It is likely that John often behaves in immoral ways”); “People don’t (John doesn’t) really care if their (his) behavior harms other people”; and “In general, I expect people to behave immorally” (“In general, I would expect John to behave immorally”); reasons (general target  $\alpha = .87$ ; specific target  $\alpha = .90$ )—“If a person did something immoral (If John was to act immorally), I could probably find a way to ‘excuse’ their (his) behavior”; “If a person (John) was to do something immoral, I could probably understand why they (he) did”; and “Although immoral behavior is hard to overlook, if a person (John) behaved immorally, I could see them (him) having a ‘reasonable’ reason for doing so.”

## Results

**Study 4A.** Dependent measures were first examined using 3 (target wealth: poor vs. wealthy vs. control)  $\times$  5 (moral violation: money vs. beating vs. slashing vs. stealing vs. littering) ANOVAs, along with a priori contrasts examining mean differences between poor and wealthy conditions (averaged across all violations) and post hoc Tukey’s honestly significant difference (HSD) tests comparing poor and wealthy conditions separately to control.<sup>12</sup> Differences between condition means, averaged across all violations, are plotted in Figure 2. Main effects of wealth condition ( $df = 2, 558$ ) emerged for immoral action ( $p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$ ), immoral character ( $p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ), reason ( $p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$ ), and

<sup>12</sup> Main effects of violation condition were also predictably found for most variables. However, these were not of theoretical interest.



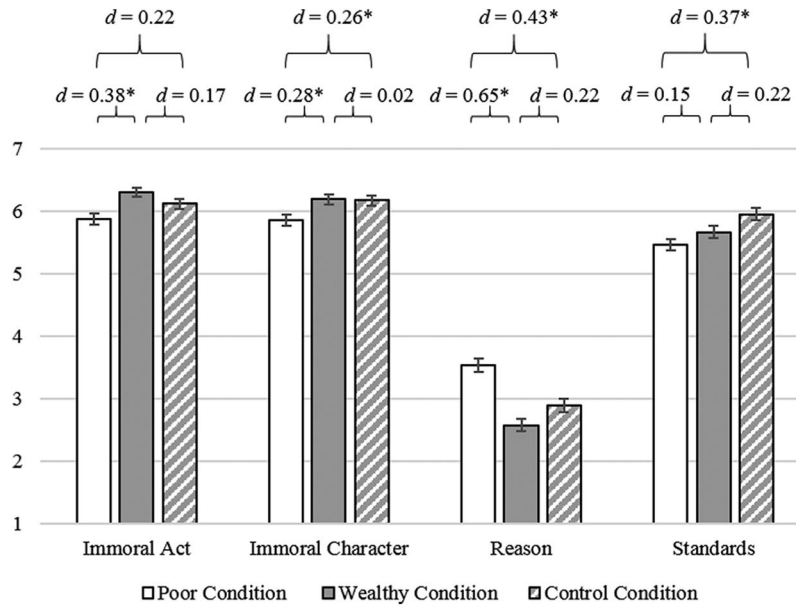


Figure 2. Effects of wealth condition on judgments across all violations in Study 4A. Effect sizes with asterisks indicate means that significantly differ at  $p < .05$  (for comparisons with control targets, Tukey's honestly significant difference tests were used). Error bars are  $\pm SEM$ .

standards ( $p = .005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ).<sup>13</sup> Planned contrasts showed that relative to the wealthy target, the poor target was held to similar standards ( $p = .106$ ) but was rated as having acted less immorally ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.38$ ), having less immoral character ( $p = .005$ ,  $d = 0.28$ ), and having better reasons ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.65$ ). Post hoc tests showed that relative to the control target, the poor target was held to lower standards ( $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.37$ ), perceived as having less immoral character ( $p = .023$ ,  $d = 0.26$ ), and perceived as having better reasons ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.43$ ). No significant differences emerged between the wealthy and control targets ( $ps > .066$ ).

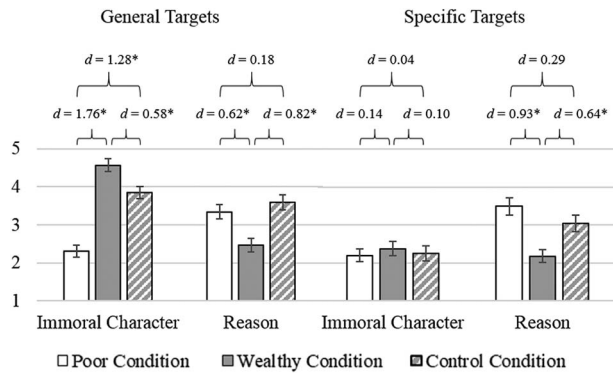
In addition to these main effects a significant interaction between wealth and violation conditions emerged for reason ( $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ), but not for immoral act ( $p = .169$ ), immoral character ( $p = .129$ ) or standards ( $p = .334$ ). For greater power, contrast tests used the omnibus mean squared error term to examine all between-groups differences within each violation type. For contrasts pitting poor against wealthy, which were the primary theoretical focus, alpha was uncorrected and remained at .05. For tests of control versus poor and wealthy, a conservative Bonferroni correction was applied such that alpha for reason was independently set at .005. For reason, significant differences suggesting poor targets had better reasons than wealthy targets emerged for money ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.96$ ), beating ( $p = .009$ ,  $d = 0.62$ ), and stealing ( $p = .020$ ,  $d = 0.49$ ). Although means were descriptively in the same direction for slashing and littering, neither of these contrasts was significant ( $ps > .058$ ). A similar pattern favoring poor targets emerged for poor versus control across all violations, but with significant differences only for money ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.89$ ; other  $ps > .013$ ). For wealthy versus control, wealthy targets were perceived as having worse reasons for the money violation ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.84$ ). Contrasts for other violations were not significant ( $ps > .039$ ).

**Study 4B.** A 2 (general target vs. specific target)  $\times$  3 (poor vs. wealthy vs. control) ANOVA examined the liking items. A significant main effect of target condition emerged, showing that specific targets ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) were liked more than were general ones ( $M = 4.97$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ),  $F(1, 308) = 10.09$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = 0.34$ . A significant main effect of wealth condition also emerged,  $F(2, 308) = 10.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ . Post hoc tests (Tukey's HSD) showed that wealthy targets ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) were liked less than poor ( $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) and control targets ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ,  $ps < .001$ , respectively;  $ds = 0.56$  and  $0.49$ ), which did not significantly differ ( $p = .992$ ). The interaction of wealth and target type was not significant,  $F(2, 308) = 1.94$ ,  $p = .146$ . Although these results show that the wealthy were not liked as much as poor people and people in general, they were not disliked, as ratings of each group were significantly above the scale midpoint ( $ts > 5.76$ ,  $ps < .001$ ).

**Study 4C.** Judgments were first examined using 2 (general target vs. specific target)  $\times$  3 (poor vs. wealthy vs. control) ANOVAs. A significant interaction between target type and wealth condition emerged on immoral character,  $F(2, 306) = 18.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.11$ . Planned contrasts provided partial support for expectancy confirmation: in the general condition only, the wealthy were perceived as more immoral than the poor and people in general, and the poor were perceived as less immoral than wealthy people and people in general (see Figure 3). In the specific target condition, no significant differences in immoral character emerged ( $ps > .456$ ), consistent with past work showing that absent concrete evidence that an individualized wealthy target is

<sup>13</sup> When participants who failed attention checks and/or did not respond to all measures were included, the main effect of wealth on immoral character was not significant,  $F(2, 585) = 2.93$ ,  $p = .054$ .





**Figure 3.** Simple effects and effect sizes of wealth condition within target conditions on character and reason judgments in Study 4C. Effect sizes with asterisks indicate means that significantly differ at  $p < .05$ . Error bars are  $\pm$ SEM. The y-axis has been truncated to emphasize condition-based differences. The original scale ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

immoral, people may give that target the benefit of the doubt (Polman et al., 2013).

For reasons, no main effect of target type ( $p = .151$ ) or interaction of target type with wealth ( $p = .204$ ) emerged. However, consistent with the notion that the wealthy are perceived as particularly lacking in good reasons to act badly, the main effect of wealth condition was significant,  $F(2, 306) = 20.14, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12$ . Planned contrasts revealed that the wealthy were perceived as having worse reasons to behave immorally than both the poor and people in general ( $ps < .001$ ). Adequacy of reasons for poor people and people in general did not significantly differ ( $p = .354$ ). Thus, participants believed that the wealthy in general and a wealthy target (who has done nothing wrong and is therefore not perceived as especially immoral) do not have any good reasons for behaving immorally. Thus, when they do behave badly, people are likely attribute that behavior to their immoral character.

## Discussion

In many ways, it is somewhat noteworthy that any effects emerged at all in Study 4A, given the highly abstract and hypothetical nature of the experiment. That is, rather than presenting participants with targets who had committed specific violations and asking for their judgments, people were simply asked to estimate what they might think when imagining different targets committing different types of violations. Despite this, averaged across five different types of moral violation—including financial transgressions/aggressive acts both minor and large—participants in Study 4A judged the actions and character of poor targets in less negative ways than wealthy targets. Moreover, with the exception of one variable, reason, no significant interactions emerged in this well-powered experiment, suggesting that the wealth-based moral judgment gap generalizes across many different transgression types. Perhaps the most telling finding in Study 4A was for reasons. For this variable, although poor targets were not perceived as having especially good reasons for acting badly, they were perceived as having better reasons than wealthy people or people in general. Further tests within each violation type told a similar

story, although given the reduced power of these comparisons, only three were significant. Finally, little evidence pointed to this gap emerging as a function of targets being held to explicitly different standards, at least as measured here (e.g., that targets should “know better”). If anything, standards were slightly lowered for both wealthy and poor targets relative to control targets.

In Study 4B, although wealthy targets were liked less than poor or control targets, there was no evidence that they are strongly disliked, suggesting that no strong anti-wealthy bias is in operation—a notion supported by implicit biases favoring the wealthy (Horwitz & Dovidio, 2017). In addition, no evidence for a pro-poor bias was found (i.e., relative to people in general), suggesting that the discounting of negativity in judgments for poor targets is not because poor people are especially liked. Instead, it seems as if poor targets might be judged less negatively because their poverty provides an explanatory framework for their behavior that does not rely solely on dispositional attributions.

Study 4C corroborated findings from Study 4A, providing even stronger support for the idea that although the poor are not perceived as having particularly good reasons to behave badly, the wealthy are perceived as having almost no reason to do so. An expectancy confirmation account was supported as well. That is, despite potential motivations to see the wealthy in a positive light (e.g., Jost et al., 2004; Lerner, 1980), the present results suggest that the wealthy are viewed as somewhat immoral, in general. That specific targets were judged as similarly likely to behave immorally indicates that people may not apply a unilateral moral penalty to the wealthy when no evidence has been provided of wrongdoing (i.e., other than thinking they are generally more immoral than nonwealthy people). However, when evidence for bad behavior is available, prior stereotypes about immorality will likely guide participants’ inferences regarding moral character, confirming negative expectations and making judgments more extreme. In contrast, it seems plausible that more persistent and abstract reasons, such as beliefs about chronic stress, might shift explanations away from character for poor targets, helping excuse their behavior in a way that it does not for wealthy targets. After using a new, more indirect method to test the idea that the wealthy have less adequate reasons for behaving badly in Study 5, Study 6 examines whether higher versus lower chronic stress leads to greater perception of wealth and whether this difference explains differences in moral judgment.

## Study 5

Study 5 used a new response latency (RL) approach that focused on the idea that the wealthy are perceived as more immoral than the poor because their immoral behavior is more diagnostic of immoral character. This study’s methods, hypotheses, and analytic strategy were preregistered with AsPredicted (a preregistration service hosted by Wharton, University of Pennsylvania, Credibility Lab) and are available at <https://aspredicted.org/wi4ta.pdf>. Participants read about a wealthy or poor target who slashed someone’s tire at a gas station because the person took “their” spot at a pump (i.e., as in Study 4A). Following this, participants responded to six forced-choice questions. Responses to three questions were expected to garner more agreement in the wealthy condition (e.g., “John’s actions say a lot about his moral character”) and three were expected to receive more agreement in the poor condition

(e.g., “John is not a bad person”). After responding to all six questions, participants explained in their own words, as in Study 2A, why the targets behaved as they did.

For the first two questions, we expected to find RL differences as a function of condition, with responses to the first and second of the questions above respectively expected to be faster and slower in the wealthy condition. Specifically, we expected that across conditions, participants would differ in the extent to which responding would require internal debate/deliberation, particularly for the first few questions (i.e., before knowing what they might be asked or making initial decisions that might influence later decisions). In particular, we expected that after reading about a wealthy target, participants would find it difficult to think of situational factors beyond the one provided (i.e., in both conditions, the target was described as having had a bad day) that might excuse slashing a stranger’s tire. Thus, in the wealthy condition, little deliberation would be needed to decide that this behavior indicates something about the target’s (bad) moral character. In contrast, participants in the poor target condition might consider alternative and additional reasons for this bad behavior (e.g., that the agent’s bad day involved the everyday stresses associated with poverty). Thus, participants should find it harder to decide whether this behavior is best explained by bad moral character and should also find it easier to conclude that he is not necessarily a bad person.

## Method

Participants read about John, described as either one of the wealthiest or poorest people in his town, who respectively received a large monthly allowance from his father or worked at several low-paying, part-time jobs. Participants then read that “. . . after a stressful day at work, John respectively drove his brand new 2019 BMW i8 convertible or a 20-year-old Ford Fiesta to a gas station”. Just as John was about to pull up to a pump, a stranger sped past him and took “his” spot. When the stranger left his car unattended at the pump, John punctured the sidewall of one of the car’s tires with a screwdriver, feeling satisfied as he watched it flatten.

**Measures.** Participants responded to six forced-choice items about the agent’s moral character and reasons for acting immorally in the following fixed order. To make their choices, participants clicked on one of two boxes (agree vs. disagree). Responses and RLs were recorded as soon as participants made their selections. After making each response, the screen automatically advanced to a “rest” screen instructing participants to click an arrow (equidistant from the two response options) when they were ready to proceed to the next statement. In order, items were as follows: “John’s actions say a lot about his moral character” (character inference); “John is not a bad person” (not bad); “John is an immoral person” (immoral character); “John’s (wealth or poverty) helps explain his behavior” (wealth explanation); “John often responds to stress with unwarranted aggression” (frequent aggression); and “Given John’s (wealth) [poverty], it’s easy to understand his aggression” (wealth justification). Finally, participants responded to the prompt, “In a few words, why did John slash the stranger’s tire?”

**Free-response coding.** After discarding responses that did not answer the prompt, five coders (blind to experimental conditions and hypotheses) coded free responses on the dimensions described below. As long as at least three coders did not discard a response,

it was retained for analyses, leaving 420 responses (211 from the poor condition). The valence code (1 = *completely positive*, 5 = *completely negative*) measured the extent to which responses were positive/favorable (e.g., seeking justice) or negative/unfavorable (e.g., spoiled jerk). The situation–person code (1 = *completely situation*, 5 = *completely person*) captured the extent to which behavioral attributions referred to causes external to the targets (e.g., tough day, difficult childhood) versus residing within the targets (e.g., personality, desires). Interrater reliability was adequate (valence  $\alpha = .80$ , situation–person  $\alpha = .96$ ).

## Results

**Responses to forced-choice questions.** Associations between wealth condition and response selection were tested using chi-square tests of independence (see Figure 4). As hypothesized, participants responded in theoretically consistent ways to four of the six questions. For the other two, although frequencies trended in expected directions, comparisons did not reach significance. For example, on the question about whether John’s wealth helped explain his behavior, most participants did not agree, perhaps showing that overall, people attributed his behavior more to his character than to his financial situation. However, those who agreed might have done so for very different reasons, with explanations in the poor condition being less negative (e.g., because of daily stresses) and explanations in the wealthy condition being more negative (e.g., because he’s spoiled and used to getting his way). Similarly, most people agreed that John was unreasonably aggressive, which seems plausible because slashing a stranger’s tire is an unusual, highly aggressive action that is likely predictive of similar aggressive acts. However, it should be noted that although responses to this question did not reach significance, they again trended in the expected direction.

**Free responses.** Supporting the idea that participants would explain John’s behavior in different ways as a function of his wealth status, participants in the wealthy condition generated more negative ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) and person-based attributions ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) than participants in the poor condition (valence  $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ; situation–person  $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ), respectively,  $ts(418) = 3.94$  and  $3.28$ ,  $ps \leq .001$ ,  $ds = 0.38$  and  $0.31$ . As in Study 2A, suggesting that person-based attributions were more negative, the situation–person and valence scales were strongly correlated ( $r = .77$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Responses latencies.** Prior to analysis of RL for the first two questions (i.e., those questions where we hypothesized an effect of condition on latency), responses greater or less than 2.5 times each item’s median absolute deviation were removed (see Leys, Ley, Klein, Bernard, & Licata, 2013).<sup>14</sup> Following this, latencies were natural-log-transformed to correct remaining positive skew. Supporting our first hypothesis, participants in the in the wealthy condition ( $M = 1.09$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ) were faster to respond to the question asking whether John’s actions were informative about his moral character than those in the poor condition ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD =$

<sup>14</sup> These analyses did not vary substantively from those including all participants. After exclusions, character inference  $n = 390$ , not bad  $n = 374$ .

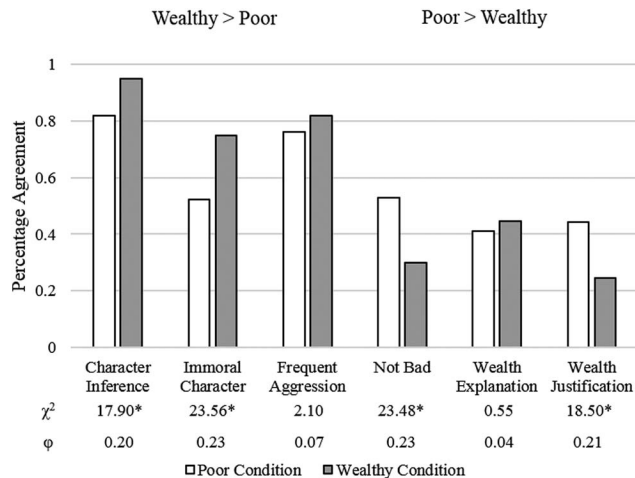


Figure 4. Effects of wealth on response selection, organized by hypothesis. \*  $p < .001$ .

0.36),  $t(388) = 4.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.41$ .<sup>15</sup> For the question asking whether John was a bad person, although responses in the wealthy condition ( $M = 1.02$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ) were descriptively a little slower than in the poor condition ( $M = 0.97$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ), this effect was not significant,  $t(372) = 1.04$ ,  $p = .298$ ,  $d = 0.11$ .<sup>16</sup>

## Discussion

Study 5, using a preregistered study design, further supported the idea that the wealth-based moral judgment gap—which emerged again for an aggressive but nonviolent harm unrelated to finance—can be explained by differences in the reasons people generate to explain wealthy and poor targets' bad behavior. This conclusion was supported in responses to forced-choice questions, in participants' self-generated explanations, and most impressively, in RL differences to a question asking whether the targets' actions were informative about his moral character. We use the word “impressively” for this last finding because most tests relying on differences in response latencies (e.g., the Implicit Association Test) as a primary dependent measure use within-participants rather than between-participants designs to increase statistical power, use button presses rather than mouse or trackpad clicks to capture latencies, and use software that has high precision in capturing response latencies. In Study 5, RL tests were between-participants, participants used trackpads or computer mice to place their cursors over the appropriate response boxes before clicking to record responses, and data were collected using ordinary survey software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) in a study administered online. Thus, finding this effect at all speaks to the robustness of the basic framework we are proposing for the wealth-based moral judgment gap.

We argue that although bad moral character might be attributed to some extent or by some people to the transgressions of poor targets, it is attributed to a greater extent and by more people to explain transgressions of the wealthy. This is likely because people have trouble understanding why a wealthy person would act immorally, given their access to material resources, comfortable lifestyle, and high status. Thus, people fall back on the funda-

mental attribution error when evaluating the bad behavior of wealthy targets and rely on primarily dispositional attributions. For poor transgressors, the same assumption of bad character is likely tempered by easily available and highly salient situational explanations, such as the frustration that comes with an inability to indulge in any luxuries, the need to work long hours for little pay in order to meet even basic needs, and the constant worries that some major life event such as an illness or the loss of a job will arise, making it difficult or impossible to survive without the charity of others. In all, it seems likely that because poverty is perceived as associated with long-term chronic stress as well as everyday difficulties in living, people take this into account when forming their moral judgments. Study 6 examines this question directly.

## Study 6

For infractions that do not provide material benefits to transgressors (e.g., slashing a tire), perceivers probably consider the chronic and everyday stress that comes with poverty when trying to understand the actions of a poor target. In contrast, even though anyone can have chronic or regularly experienced stress (e.g., mental health issues, relationship problems), it seems reasonable to assume that most perceivers believe the wealthy live relatively stress-free lives. Study 6 (this study was also preregistered with AsPredicted and is available at <https://aspredicted.org/gw37e.pdf>) tested the idea that presenting participants with targets who are higher versus lower in stress would lead them to make inferences about the targets' wealth, which would be associated with differences in moral judgments for a relatively minor moral infraction. We also preregistered a secondary, more tentative hypothesis that inferences about wealth would mediate moral judgments.

## Method

Participants read about John, who had lived either an easy or hard, stress-free or stress-filled life and who rarely or often encountered problems he could not solve. Participants also read that John's recent life had been particularly stress-free or stressful. Following this, participants were informed that John recently went to a mall but became frustrated and angry when he could not find a parking spot. John stole an accessible-parking (disability parking) permit from a van with its window open, hung it on his own rearview mirror, and then parked illegally in an accessible-parking spot.

Participants responded to dependent measures in the following fixed order: perceived wealth—“If you had to guess, how wealthy is John?” (1 = a lot poorer than average, 4 = average wealth, 7 = a lot wealthier than average); immoral character ( $r = .62$ )—“To what extent would you say that John is an immoral person? John is . . .” (1 = not at all immoral, 7 = very immoral) and “To what extent does John's behavior (i.e., stealing and parking illegally) tell you something about his moral character?” (1 = not at all, 7 =

<sup>15</sup> This effect held ( $p < .001$ ) when controlling for response selection and speed to responding on a forced-choice attention check question.

<sup>16</sup> When controlling for response selection and speed to responding on a forced-choice attention check question, this effect approached but still did not reach significance,  $F(1, 370) = 2.64$ ,  $p = .105$ .



very much); punishment—“How much punishment does John deserve for his behavior (i.e., stealing and parking illegally)?” (1 = very little punishment, 7 = a lot of punishment); perceived stress (manipulation check)—“To what extent has John experienced chronic stress throughout his life?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

## Results and Discussion

Mean differences were examined using  $t$  tests with 404 degrees of freedom. The manipulation worked as expected. Low-stress John ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) was perceived as much less stressed than high-stress John ( $M = 6.16$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), ( $t = 34.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 3.41$ ). Consistent with hypotheses, low-stress John was viewed as wealthier ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ), more immoral ( $M = 5.94$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), and more deserving of punishment ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) than was high-stress John (wealth:  $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ; immoral character:  $M = 5.60$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ; punishment:  $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ;  $t_s = 11.83$ ,  $3.03$ , and  $2.99$ ,  $p_s \leq .003$ ,  $d_s = 1.17$ ,  $0.30$ , and  $0.29$ , respectively). As hypothesized, perceived wealth was positively correlated with immoral character ( $r = .18$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and punishment ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Next, we examined our tentative hypothesis regarding whether the effects of stress condition on immoral character and punishment would be explained by inferences about wealth. Two separate models were tested using a bootstrapping approach (10,000 resamples) to generate bias-corrected standard errors of indirect effects. In one, stress condition was used to predict wealth inferences and immoral character, with wealth inferences also predicting character. In the second, character was removed and replaced with punishment. The results of these models are shown in Figure 5 (top panel: immoral character; bottom panel: punishment). As hypothesized, the indirect effects of condition on both immoral character ( $ab = -0.16$ , 95% CI  $[-0.29, -0.03]$ ) and punishment ( $ab = -0.32$ , 95% CI  $[-0.49, -0.16]$ ) were significant through perceived wealth ( $p_s < .05$ ). The direct effects of stress on immorality and punishment were not significant ( $p_s = .162$  and  $.528$ , respectively).

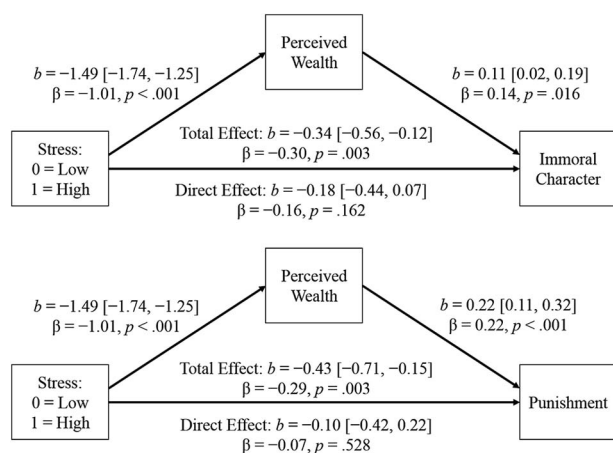


Figure 5. Mediation of the effects of stress on immoral character and punishment through perceived wealth,  $b$  = unstandardized coefficients.  $\beta$  = standardized coefficients. 95% confidence intervals of unstandardized coefficients are in brackets.

Using a preregistered design that manipulated stress rather than wealth, Study 6 demonstrated a clear relationship between perceptions of stress, inferences about wealth, and moral judgments. The relationship between stress and moral judgments (i.e., of immoral character and deservingness of punishment) was also explained by wealth inferences. This suggests that perceived chronicity of stress is one type of explanation for bad behavior that likely varies for wealthy and poor targets, and that this explanation can account for differences in judgment of moral character. It is worth noting that although the effect size for manipulated stress on wealth inferences was large, the respective effects of stress and wealth on moral judgments were more modest. It is also notable that the targets' financial status in both conditions was not perceived as extremely high or low, with means slightly above and below the scale midpoint. Thus, although wealth was perceived as respectively higher and lower in the low-stress and high-stress conditions, participants did not see either target as particularly wealthy or poor. This probably contributed the smaller observed effect size on moral judgment, but it also suggests that wealth information can impact perceived immorality even when targets' finances are not at the extremes. Nevertheless, that any differences in moral judgment emerged as a function of perceived wealth for a relatively minor moral violation (i.e., stealing a parking placard and parking illegally) further shows that the effects documented here are robust across a number of types of transgression and ranges of wealth difference.

Finally, although wealth does play a role in people's chronic/current stress (e.g., Blair et al., 2013; Blair & Raver, 2016; Evans et al., 2011; Larsson, 2006; Lupien et al., 2001; Piff & Moskowitz, 2018), we acknowledge that differences in perceived stress as a function of wealth probably would not explain the moral judgment gap in every situation. Instead, the reasons participants generate to explain poor targets' behavior almost certainly vary as a function of transgression. For wealthy targets, however, one reason appears to be highly salient and to remain fairly stable, *regardless* of transgression: bad moral character. We return to this idea in the General Discussion.

## Study 7

In Study 7, we examined a new but related question: If participants respectively evaluate the misdeeds of wealthy and poor targets in more and less negative ways, making more dispositional inferences in the former case and more situational in the latter, how might the moral behavior of the poor and wealthy be evaluated? That is, although wealthy people's bad behavior appears to be most easily understood in terms of bad character, what would best explain their actively prosocial behaviors? One likely answer is that because the wealthy can "afford" good behavior, other explanations than good character might be salient, such as seeking tax relief, positive publicity (see Siem & Stürmer, 2018), trying to make themselves feel better, or simply having an excess of free time or resources. However, when the poor act prosocially—particularly when these behaviors are costly to them—perceivers might favor dispositional explanations for their behavior. If the poor behave charitably, they must be good people, acting out of the goodness of their hearts.

Study 7 tested these hypotheses by having participants evaluate the behavior of a poor or wealthy target who donated \$200, one



week of their income, or seven hours of their time to a charity. Donating a fixed amount of money, which would represent a larger proportion of a poor person's earnings and a greater sacrifice relative to that of a wealthy person (i.e., even though the actual amount is the same), should result in especially strong effects. When targets donate the same proportion of their earnings, the wealthy person's donation should be perceived as substantially larger than the poor person's donation, which might attenuate or even negate effects. Finally, although it could be argued that time is more valuable for either poor or wealthy people, all people have the same amount of time in a given day. Therefore, we included a third condition where agents volunteered their time instead of donating their money.

We hypothesized that poor targets would be viewed as having better moral character, having sacrificed more, and having acted less out of external motivation. We also expected that their behavior would seem more surprising (e.g., because a poor target would have many reasons *not* to sacrifice their limited resources) and that they would be accorded more praise. Moreover, we predicted that in the proportional condition alone, participants would think the charity (a homeless shelter) would benefit more from the wealthy donation because objectively, the wealthy target would have donated a larger amount. We had no firm hypotheses about interactions between wealth and donation type because it seemed likely that differences would be similar across all donation types. However, we were uncertain whether the effects of wealth would substantively decrease when the wealthy agent gave more (i.e., proportional condition) or when the charitable behavior only involved the targets' time.

## Method

After reading wealth descriptions identical to those from Study 5, participants read that John felt troubled by the increasing number of homeless people in his community and decided to do something to help. He went to a nearby homeless shelter and was told that the most helpful thing he could do would be to donate money to the shelter. In the fixed donation condition, John donated \$200 to the shelter. In the proportional donation condition, John donated one week of his income to the shelter. In the time condition, John insisted on volunteering for seven hours over the course of a month. In the fixed and proportional conditions, John resolved to make the same donation twice per year. In the time condition, John resolved to volunteer approximately the same amount of time each month.

All questions were presented in individualized, random orders: moral character—"To what extent would you say John is a moral person?" (1 = *not very moral*, 7 = *very moral*); praise—"How much praise does John deserve for [donating money/volunteering]?" (1 = *no praise*, 7 = *a lot of praise*); personal sacrifice—"How much of a sacrifice was it for John to [donate the money to/volunteer at] the shelter?" (1 = *very small sacrifice*, 7 = *very large sacrifice*); generosity—"How generous is John?" (1 = *not at all generous*, 7 = *very generous*); external motivation—"Was John hoping for some sort of reward [e.g., praise, a tax deduction] when he [donated money/volunteered]?" (1 = *definitely not*, 7 = *definitely*); surprise—"How surprised are you that John [donated money to/volunteered at] the shelter?" (1 = *not at all surprised*, 7 = *very surprised*); benefit—"How much do you think John's

[donation/volunteering] helped the homeless shelter?" (1 = *not much*, 7 = *substantially*).

## Results and Discussion

Dependent measures were first examined using 2 (wealthy vs. poor target)  $\times$  3 (fixed vs. proportional vs. time donation) ANOVAs (*df* were 1, 248 for tests of the wealth factor and 2, 248 for tests of the donation factor and interactions). Significant interactions were followed by simple effects tests of wealth within donation conditions (Table 3 provides means, standard deviations, and Cohen's *d*).

Significant main effects of wealth were found for all but one variable (benefit,  $p = .163$ ), with *F* statistics ranging from a low of 12.05 (surprise,  $p = .001$ ) to a high of 343.76 (sacrifice,  $p < .001$ ). Main effects of donation condition were found for praise ( $p = .041$ ), sacrifice ( $p = .033$ ), and generosity ( $p < .001$ ; for surprise,  $p = .051$ ; other  $ps > .095$ ).<sup>17</sup> In addition, significant interactions ( $ps < .004$ ) were found for all variables except moral character ( $p = .389$ ), external motivation ( $p = .283$ ), and praise ( $p = .079$ ). Simple effects tests confirmed that in each donation condition, significant differences that were found favored the poor, with the largest effect sizes in the fixed donation condition ( $ts > 2.36$ , all  $ps < .05$ ; two exceptions were for external motivation in the fixed condition and benefit in the time condition,  $ps > .416$ ).

Surprisingly, in the fixed donation condition, participants thought the poor target's donation had a more positive impact on the shelter than the donation from the wealthy target, even though the shelter received the same amount of money in both cases. Objectively, this is somewhat puzzling. Most likely, perceived benefit to the shelter in this condition reflected a spillover effect, in that the greater moral credit accorded to the poor target translated into an accompanying belief that the shelter received a greater benefit. In the same way, participants' denial of moral credit when the wealthy target gave only a "small" amount (relative to what he could have given) may have translated into lower perceived benefit to the shelter. Yet, in the proportional conditions, although the wealthy target was reasonably perceived as providing greater benefit to the shelter, he was still given less moral credit than the poor target. This is consistent with work showing that, at least in public goods games, people with more money are expected to make larger contributions for the public good (see, e.g., Hauser, Kraft-Todd, Rand, Nowak, & Norton, 2019; Reuben & Riedl, 2013).

These results clearly demonstrate that when the two targets gave the objectively same amount, moral judgments strongly favored the poor target. However, even when the financial gift to the shelter was perceived as more beneficial (i.e., in the proportional condition), moral judgments still favored the poor target. Most notably, even when the praiseworthy act did not involve money (i.e., when targets volunteered), poor agents were rated more positively on every evaluative variable, and effect sizes remained large. Although it might be argued that time is more precious to the poor because it could be used to earn needed resources, counterarguments could also be made that because wealthy people are

<sup>17</sup> When participants who failed attention checks and/or did not respond to all measures were included, the main effect of donation on praise was not significant,  $F(2, 263) = 2.94, p = .055$ .

Table 3  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Associated Simple Main Effects Test Statistics for All Dependent Variables

Dependent measures	Fixed donation ( <i>n</i> = 85)			Proportional donation ( <i>n</i> = 86)			Time donation ( <i>n</i> = 83)		
	Poor	Wealthy	<i>d</i>	Poor	Wealthy	<i>d</i>	Poor	Wealthy	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )		<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )		<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	
Moral character	6.35 (1.04)	5.46 (1.00)	0.87*	6.18 (1.35)	5.52 (1.35)	0.49†	6.42 (0.73)	5.27 (1.28)	1.10*
Praise	5.89 (1.60)	3.82 (1.68)	1.26*	5.93 (1.66)	4.93 (1.50)	0.63†	6.00 (1.27)	4.65 (1.66)	0.91*
Sacrifice	6.37 (1.06)	1.64 (1.04)	4.50*	6.16 (1.60)	2.76 (1.64)	2.10*	5.42 (1.20)	3.65 (1.79)	1.16*
Generosity	6.54 (0.84)	3.90 (1.50)	2.17*	6.80 (0.46)	5.33 (1.36)	1.45*	6.40 (0.85)	4.63 (1.64)	1.36*
External motivation	1.61 (1.16)	1.85 (1.39)	0.19	1.48 (1.21)	2.19 (1.45)	0.53†	1.58 (1.10)	2.45 (1.68)	0.61†
Surprise	5.74 (1.47)	3.15 (1.94)	1.50*	5.57 (1.80)	4.26 (1.85)	0.72*	3.49 (1.94)	5.02 (1.79)	0.82*
Benefit	5.30 (1.35)	3.97 (1.33)	0.99*	4.75 (1.77)	5.50 (1.35)	0.48†	5.05 (1.34)	4.85 (1.63)	0.13

†  $p < .05$ . \*  $p \leq .001$ .

paid more for their time, each hour in a day is more valuable. Either way, time is not money, and the days of the poor and wealthy alike contain the same number of hours.

### General Discussion

The poor are punished more frequently and severely than the wealthy for their crimes, and in a number of ways, the wealthy are viewed more positively than the poor (e.g., Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Fiske, 2018; Fiske et al., 1999, 2002; Hunt, 2004; Jost et al., 2004; Rudman et al., 2002; Weiner, 1995). This suggests the poor might be evaluated more harshly than the wealthy for the same moral violations. Although an initial study demonstrated that laypeople believe this is true, we expected that the lay prediction was wrong. A number of experiments using multiple methods and transgressions ranging from minor to severe confirmed this: Across nine further studies, two of which were preregistered, a wealth-based moral judgment gap was found that favors the poor, not the wealthy. Likely, this gap is based in large part on people's inability to generate reasonable justifications that would help explain wealthy people's moral transgressions. Being unable to generate sufficient exculpatory reasons, participants ultimately rely on harsher character judgments of the wealthy (vs. the poor) to explain their bad behavior, also adjusting their estimation of the immorality of their acts.

Several other explanations for this basic finding were examined. One possibility we considered was that if prescriptive moral standards are higher for the wealthy than the poor (i.e., better behavior is expected from the wealthy), failure to meet these standards could lead to harsher moral judgments. Similarly, we reasoned that if the wealthy are believed to be less immoral than the poor, expectancy violation might help explain heightened judgments of wealthy immorality (Jussim et al., 1987). Another possibility was that people strongly dislike the wealthy or like the poor, leading them to derogate the wealthy and excuse the poor when given the opportunity.

None of these explanations received much support. Although Study 4B showed that the wealthy are liked somewhat less than the poor and people in general, they were not particularly disliked, so there would be little motivation to derogate them because of active hostility. Additionally, no pro-poor bias was found (i.e., relative to people in general), making it an unlikely explanation for why negativity in judgments of poor targets was discounted (e.g., Study

2B). Study 4A also showed that similar behavior was expected from wealthy and poor people, at least for those transgressive behaviors that also reveal a judgment gap. Study 4C also showed that wealthy targets are viewed as somewhat more, rather than less immoral than poor people and people in general. These findings contribute to a small but growing body of scholarship documenting that the wealthy are not viewed positively on every evaluative dimension (e.g., Gilmore & Harris, 2008; Horwitz & Dovidio, 2017; Parker, 2012). In addition, Study 4C helped rule out expectancy violation as the source of the moral judgment gap but was consistent with a role for expectancy confirmation. That is, observing bad behavior from wealthy targets appears to confirm prior beliefs that they are somewhat immoral, exacerbating negativity in judgments (e.g., Biernat et al., 2008).

Although expectancy confirmation for the wealthy and a difference in the extent to which the wealthy and poor are liked probably both play some role in explaining the findings presented here, one explanation that received clear and consistent support regards beliefs about why wealthy and poor people behave badly. Clearly, some attribution of immoral character will be invoked to explain any actor's immoral behaviors. However, we reasoned that relative to wealthy people, poor people might be given greater moral leeway, particularly for transgressions involving money. That is, it should be easier to understand the financial misdeeds of the poor in situational terms, removing the need to explain them solely in terms of immoral character. This was supported in Studies 2A and 2B, where participants' free (Study 2A) and scale responses (Study 2A and 2B) indicated they believed poor targets had better (i.e., more exculpatory) reasons than wealthy targets to keep money a coworker had lost. In Study 2B, consistent with recent work showing that perceiving difficulties ("headwinds") for the self leads to greater moral self-licensing (Davidai & Gilovich, 2016), when participants learned a transgressor was poor, they also discounted their moral judgments (e.g., Kelley, 1972), suggesting that poverty exculpated financial crimes. Importantly, this judgment gap persisted even when financial need was equated to some extent (i.e., in Study 2B; see also the online supplemental material) and was similar in magnitude whether or not targets were compensated for beating up a stranger (Study 3), also emerging for nonfinancial transgressions (Studies 4A, 5, and 6). In fact, this difference in perceived adequacy of reasons was found consistently in each study that was conducted.

Yet, although the evidence in some studies points to the poor being excused for bad behavior because their reasons for it are “better,” such as when it involves material resources (Studies 2A and 2B, Study 4A) or because of chronic stress (Study 6), the more strongly supported interpretation is that the wealthy are not excused, because there are fewer ways to explain their immoral behavior beyond by attributing it to a core feature of their personality. For example, in Study 4A, participants could not think of good reasons or understand why the wealthy would engage in five different immoral behaviors (e.g., keeping found money and lying, stealing an item of little value, slashing a stranger’s tire). In contrast, although people could not completely understand why a poor person or a person of unspecified wealth would engage in these behaviors, they could more easily understand it than when a wealthy person did them, and judgments of the poor and people did not differ from one another.

Similarly, in Study 4C, participants had trouble understanding and excusing immoral behavior in the abstract for the wealthy, and although this was also true for the poor and people in general, it was less true and did not differ for the latter two groups. Notably, the same pattern was reproduced for targets who were described as poor, wealthy, or where wealth was not explicitly specified, even though predictions for whether these specific targets would behave immorally did not differ across conditions. This suggests that even if people think the wealthy are somewhat immoral, they may not predict worse behavior from a wealthy person than a poor one without concrete evidence of immorality. However, because wealthy people are perceived as having less excusable or understandable reasons for behaving badly, when they do transgress, perceivers quickly rush to character explanations. At least, compared with a poor target, they are quicker to decide that a wealthy target’s behavior is probably informative about the target’s moral character (Study 5).

Finally, Study 7 demonstrated that the moral judgment asymmetry runs in two directions: Although people believe wealthy people must be more immoral than poor people when they both commit the same immoral acts, they believe the poor must be more moral than the wealthy when they perform the same prosocial acts. Again, these differences likely emerged because people assume that wealthy and poor people differ in their reasons for acting prosocially. For the poor, who have fewer resources and perhaps fewer reasons to behave charitably, their behavior is costly and difficult to understand except in terms of their generosity and moral goodness. In contrast, although the wealthy are accorded some credit for behaving charitably, this credit appeared to be discounted. People may therefore assume that the wealthy can and should give back, but also believe that this kind of behavior is not particularly costly to them, as they have sufficient resources to do so without causing themselves any hardship.

### Theoretical Contributions

Although some past research has shown, for example, that low-status targets are judged as less deserving of punishment than high-status targets who commit the same unambiguous moral transgressions (Polman et al., 2013), the present research makes several notable contributions that widen and deepen our knowledge. First, it helps establish that the wealthy are consistently judged more harshly than the poor across a wide variety of trans-

gression types, including serious transgressions such as acts of violence, vandalism, and stealing large amounts of money, and more benign transgressions such as stealing an inexpensive item from a store or falsely using an accessible parking placard. Additionally, the present work shows how the moral judgment gap also exists for praiseworthy actions (i.e., that wealthy people are perceived as less moral than poor people even when they give more money to charity). Moreover, although past work has shown how differences in status affect punishment (Polman et al., 2013), the present work links this directly to wealth differences in a number of ways, demonstrating the robustness of a moral judgment gap across measures as varied as character, actions, blame, punishment, surprise, anger, and reasons for bad behavior. A variety of methods were also used, including free responses, rating scales, and response latencies, with each method converging on the same conclusion.

The present findings also run counter to a different pattern of results that might have been suggested by several theoretical frameworks (e.g., system justification theory; the belief in a just world), actual findings in the real world (i.e., that the poor are likelier to be incarcerated than the wealthy), and lay expectations (e.g., that the poor would be judged more harshly than the wealthy in Study 1). Also, this work has not only fully documented a wealth-based moral judgment gap but has helped rule out several potential competing explanations for it, including expectancy violation, different moral standards for the wealthy and poor, and antipathy toward the wealthy.

Ultimately, the most consistent explanation for the wealth-based moral judgment gap was that people attributed different reasons for the immoral behavior of wealthy and poor people. This is consistent with an argument advanced by Uhlmann et al. (2015; see also Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003)—whose work focused not on the effects of wealth on moral judgments but on discrepancies between moral judgments of acts and character—that acts which are unusual and do not appear to be situationally motivated are particularly diagnostic of immoral character, even when the acts themselves are not rated as especially immoral (e.g., eating a dead dog is perceived as less immoral than stealing, but as more diagnostic of immoral character; Uhlmann & Zhu, 2014). Although none of the transgressions investigated here were particularly unusual, and were never the focus of an experimental manipulation, participants did find it more surprising when wealthy (vs. poor) people took money from coworkers (Study 2), beat up strangers (Study 3), and slashed tires (Study 5). Thus, it is reasonable to speculate that this was a contributing factor in why wealthy people were perceived as having more immoral character than poor people. Furthermore, in two conditions of Study 7, participants were also more surprised by poor (vs. wealthy) targets’ behaviors and rated these targets as having better moral character, which is consistent with the idea that behaviors that are more atypical may also impact positive judgments of character. Yet, suggesting that differences in perceived atypicality may not have been the primary driver of differences in moral character judgment, in the time condition of Study 7, the behavior of the wealthy target was viewed as substantially more surprising, even though the same target’s character was viewed as substantially less moral. In addition, as noted above, although differences in perceived atypicality of behaviors as a function of wealth may have contributed to observed differences in character judgments, the

present work showed that wealthy (vs. poor) targets are viewed as worse people and as having committed more heinous acts. Thus, our findings show that the effects of wealth on moral judgment generalize beyond character judgments, in that they impact beliefs about the morality of acts, assignment of blame/praise, desired punishment, emotional responses, and a number of related variables.

### Limitations and Future Directions

We believe the findings presented here are interesting and compelling. We also believe they only represent a start. Although we demonstrated the robustness of the moral judgment gap beyond financial domains—with targets beating up strangers, slashing tires, littering, and stealing a parking tag and parking illegally—and extended prosociality to include a nonfinancial moral behavior in Study 7 (donating time), it is unknown whether the gap will be reproduced in domains outside of care/harm (e.g., fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal; see Graham et al., 2013; but see, e.g., Schein & Gray, 2018, for a discussion of how all moral violations involve harm). Future research should explore this possibility.

In addition, although we used more than one experimental approach, we mostly relied on vignettes with simple descriptions of targets as wealthy or poor, with targets in many cases described as born into their financial situations. This may have made systematic or class-based sources of poverty/wealth more salient, and results might have differed for particular types of targets or those people whose wealth or poverty is based on different levels of “deservingness” (e.g., because they earned their wealth or squandered it). For example, it has been argued that members of the white working class view wealthy entrepreneurs positively but wealthy professionals (e.g., doctors, lawyers) more negatively (e.g., Williams, 2017). Similarly, the source of a person’s wealth (e.g., inheritance vs. entrepreneurship vs. unethical behavior) drives assumptions about their personality (Christopher et al., 2005), and might also affect moral judgment. As part of an initial exploration into the topic, we believe the decision to describe wealth status simply was justified. Moreover, real-world cues regarding wealth (e.g., clothes, cars, housing) may convey little information other than wealth differences, making the information we provided similar to what participants might infer in the real world from available cues (e.g., a person in an expensive car might be wealthy through inheritance, hard work, or misdeeds). Nevertheless, future research should examine whether the gap persists when comparing targets from specified groups, targets who differ in the extent to which they are deserving of or responsible for their poverty or wealth, and targets who have not always been poor or wealthy.

It is also possible that, on the basis of target wealth, participants inferred features important to moral judgment other than those we measured. For example, previous research has shown that high-status, dominant targets are given more punishment for ambiguous transgressions than high-status, prestigious targets (Kakkar, Sivanathan, & Gobel, 2019). In the present work, participants may have perceived wealthy targets as particularly dominant, which might have exacerbated the wealth-based moral judgment gap. Similarly, impulsive immoral actions are perceived as less diagnostic of immoral character than more deliberate ones (Pizarro et al., 2003), and possibly, poor (vs. wealthy) targets’ immoral ac-

tions may be perceived as more impulsive in general, attenuating moral judgments. Future research might systematically vary features such as wealthy and poor targets’ dominance and prestige, as well as the impulsiveness/deliberativeness of their actions.

The wealth-based moral judgment gap should also be examined in non-Western samples, or in places where the wealth gap is not as large (or perceived to be as large; see Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; see also Norton & Ariely, 2011) as it is in the United States (APA, 2007; Parker, 2012). It seems reasonable that when average wealth differences between the wealthy and poor are smaller or when upward financial mobility is a more realistic possibility for a greater percentage of the population, anti-wealthy/pro-poor differences in judgment may not emerge as strongly, if at all.

Another explanation for the effects we found, but one that we did not examine directly, might be rooted in participants’ feelings of empathy for the targets. The inability to empathize with a person predicts mechanistic dehumanization of that person—seeing them as cold, replaceable, and otherwise machine-like and undeserving of compassion (see Haslam, 2006). Because businesspeople, who are presumably wealthier than most, have been both explicitly and implicitly associated with machine-like qualities (Loughnan & Haslam, 2007), people may have failed to empathize much with our wealthy targets. Furthermore, focusing on a target’s enviable traits such as wealth may also cause perceivers to fail to empathize (O’Brien, Kristal, Ellsworth, & Schwarz, 2018), subsequently leading them to disregard circumstances that might motivate their moral transgressions. For example, greater sympathy for low-status targets predicts more lenient moral judgment (Polman et al., 2013). Future research should therefore explore whether empathy and mechanistic dehumanization play any role in the moral judgment disparity between wealthy and poor targets, perhaps by systematically varying relatability, using a perspective taking manipulation, or describing targets as possessing more or less human characteristics.

In addition, we note that past work has shown that participants in public goods games are willing to sacrifice funds to punish “wealthier” players (i.e., those with larger starting endowments) if they fail to meet relatively higher contribution standards (Hauser et al., 2019; Reuben & Riedl, 2013). Consistent with this, in the present research, people regularly rated wealthy targets as more deserving of punishment. However, it is not clear whether these judgments would manifest in the real world as actual punishment tendencies, particularly if punishment was costly. Future research might consider testing this possibility.

One important consideration is that in the real world, the wealthy are much likelier to escape legal punishment than the poor. Participants’ expectations in Study 1 that the poor would be judged more harshly than the wealthy seem to reflect this idea (i.e., that the legal system and even people in general favor the wealthy). Why then were the poor not judged more harshly than the wealthy here? One possibility is that participants may have attenuated their judgments out of concern that punitive judgments would seem biased against the underprivileged (e.g., a social desirability response bias). Although it is possible that this contributed some to the observed effects, it seems likely that social desirability concerns would be reduced in the context of an anonymous online experiment (i.e., when it is unlikely that anyone is watching) relative to a real world context such as when serving on a jury (i.e., where the real-world prowealthy bias is evident).



Another potential concern is that the participants we recruited are not representative of those who make punishment decisions in the US justice system. Although participants' self-reported wealth and social class did not have strong or consistent effects on moral judgment (see the online supplemental material), the majority of our sample was likely much poorer on average than judges who are sometimes criticized for handing down light punishments to wealthy offenders. It is also possible that police officers do not consider the reasons and excuses that the poor may have for committing moral transgressions. Instead, because poor people are almost certainly likelier to commit certain types of crimes (e.g., simple theft)—which are also easier to discover than crimes such as insider trading or embezzlement—police may give obviously wealthy suspects more benefit of the doubt when circumstances suggest they may have done something wrong. Future research might examine whether the effects we found would replicate when wealthy people or those involved in the criminal justice system (e.g., judges, lawyers, or police officers) serve as participants.

Finally, the present work focused primarily on unambiguous moral transgressions. Prior research has shown that low-status targets are perceived as less deserving of punishment only when moral transgressions are unambiguous; when transgressions are ambiguous, high-status targets are perceived as less deserving of punishment (Polman et al., 2013). Since the wealthy have the resources to afford legal representation and public relations teams who might use a variety of tactics to try and convince people that their clients have done nothing wrong (i.e., to make it more ambiguous as to whether a crime has been committed), this might also explain why the poor are punished more frequently and severely than the wealthy. Furthermore, the nonviolent, “white-collar” crimes committed primarily by the wealthy may both seem more ambiguously immoral to laypeople (e.g., because they do not involve direct harm to a single victim), and may in some cases be legally ambiguous, to the extent that the wealthy exert a disproportionate influence over the law itself both in the US (Bartels, 2009) and the world at large (Fuentes-Nieva & Galasso, 2014).

## Conclusion

We believe our findings present a solid first step in documenting and understanding how and why moral judgments differ for the poor and wealthy. In our view, the extent to which poverty and wealth are perceived as situational constraints on behavior that motivate agents' actions is of particular importance. Although wealthy members of society are often punished less harshly than the poor, our results indicate they are nevertheless judged more severely by laypeople when they unambiguously harm others. What we find particularly interesting is that laypeople predicted the opposite effect, making our findings counter-intuitive and potentially surprising to many. Perhaps the predictions people have about how we judge others primarily recognize and acknowledge the way the penal system treats people from these different groups. On the other hand, our actual findings might represent how people wish the world worked—holding those with privilege to a higher standard because they can almost always “afford” good behavior, and giving a break to those whose circumstances make it difficult at times to do the right thing, particularly when the choice is between doing the right thing and simply surviving.

## Context of the Research

This project was initially motivated by both authors' concern in the large and increasing levels of economic inequality in the United States and by the second author's ongoing research program that investigates the factors that influence social and moral judgment. We noted that although others had documented the consequences of the widening wealth gap for public health and well-being, little work had examined how wealth gaps might influence important person perception processes, such as moral judgment. In ongoing work, we are examining potential boundary conditions of the wealth-based moral judgment gap, such as whether the effect holds across different sources of wealth/poverty (e.g., hard work vs. good luck; laziness vs. bad luck) and whether effects generalize across moral violations that are less obviously based in harm.

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