

Cognitive and Emotional Drivers of Punishment Decisions Against Leaders: A Neurobehavioral Perspective

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Abstract

When a national leader is accused of impropriety, people often desire his ouster. To explain such desire for punishment, the authors tested two predictions of the model of intuitive prosecutors. One was that continuing in the position after an allegation activates the prosecutorial mind among people but resignation deactivates it. Another was that the relation between an inappropriate response by the leader and the desired punishment is mediated sequentially by dispositional attribution to, outrage with, and attitude toward him. In Experiment 1, the accused leader had *resigned* (i.e., already punished) or *hadn't resigned from* the position (i.e., remained unpunished). In Experiment 2, he had also *cooperated with* (i.e., an appropriate response) or *threatened* the accusers and the investigators (i.e., an inappropriate response). Participants ($N_s = 168$ and 200) made the dispositional attribution, outrage, attitude, and punishment responses to the leader. Results supported both predictions. Theoretical, methodological, and applied implications of the findings are discussed.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants and design

One hundred and 68 participants (101 men and 67 women) were first-year students from the 2-year postgraduate program in management at the Indian Institute of Management Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. They volunteered to participate in response to an appeal by the second author. This population has great practical interests because most of them assume leadership roles in business and/or government upon their graduation.

The authors randomly assigned the participants to one of the three levels of a single-factor between-participants design ($n_s = 56$ per cell). The independent variable (IV) was the leader's response to an alleged financial misappropriation with levels of *immediately resigned* (-1), *resigned after 6 months under mounting pressure* (0), and *hadn't resigned* (1). The digit in the parenthesis beside the level denotes its corresponding categorical code for analysis of variance (ANOVA). The dependent variable (DV) was desired punishment and the three mediating variables (MVs) were dispositional attribution, outrage, and attitude ([Attachment 1 reports the three vignettes used and the responses measured in Experiment 1](#)).

Manipulation of the leader's response to the allegation

The authors prepared three vignettes in which a leader of the national political party and a current member of the parliament was alleged to have committed gross financial misappropriations in one of his companies. His response to the accusation was (1) *immediate resignation*, (2) *resignation after 6 months under mounting pressure*, or (3) *continuing in the positions*. The number of words across the reports were about the same.

Measures

The authors sought answers to the questions about the vignette and those implicated in it from the participants along 9-point Likert-type scales, anchored by 1 (*lowest*) and 9 (*highest*). Contingent upon the questions asked, expressions such as *not at all* or *not at all sure* had

appeared below the lowest level but expressions such as *extremely* or *almost certainly* had below the highest level.

Manipulation checks

To check success of the manipulations, the authors had included three questions (i.e., *did the leader resign immediately after the allegation?*; *did the leader resign after 6 months after mounting pressure?*; and *did the person continue to be the leader in spite of mounting pressure?*) among seven filler questions about the news reports and those implicated in it. These questions preceded those measuring the MVs and the DV.

Outrage

The authors measured outrage with the leader by soliciting responses to six questions about how *angry*, *disgusted*, *embarrassed*, *mad*, *turned off*, and *pained* the participants felt (Singh et al., 2018). These items were juxtaposed with four items of positive feelings to disguise the purpose of the study and to prevent a uniform pattern of responding.

Dispositional attribution

The authors had asked participants to indicate how likely is it (a) *that this leader would do the same in a similar situation in the future?* and (b) *that this leader would do the same in any situation involving allegation?* Notably, the first and the second questions pertained to *high consistency* and *low distinctiveness* that jointly imply disposition of the accused (Singh & Lin, 2011; Singh et al., 2012). These two items were mixed with eight filler items that tapped honesty, morality, and other attributes of the leader.

Attitude and punishment

The final section dealing with the leader and his party consisted of three items of attitude toward the leader and three items of punishment for the leader mixed with four filler items. The attitude

items asked how likely is it that the participant would *vote for the continuity of, ... defend the style of, and ... enjoy working with* the leader. Desired punishment for the leader was assessed by asking how much the participant would like that *formal complaints be made against this leader by his party members, ... he be issued a show cause notice, and ... he be suspended from the party until he comes out clean.*

Because items measuring attitude toward the leader were in the positive, the authors reverse-scored the responses to ensure a uniform direction on all four measured variables. Thus, high scores on the MVs and the DV denote punitive responses to the leader.

Procedure

In a study of reactions to news reports, participants met in groups of 12 to 15 at a time, read one vignette of financial misappropriation by a national leader in English, and made 40 judgments. Of those judgments, 10 were about the news reports and those implicated in the news (3 manipulation check items and 7 filler items) and 30 about the leader and his party (14 related to the MVs and the DV and 16 fillers). Responses were anonymous.

Participants read one of the three vignettes distributed randomly among them, and answered the questions that followed. They worked at their own paces, and completed the task within 30 min. Toward the end, they also supplied information about their age, gender, and work experiences. The authors ended each session of the data gathering with a full debriefing.

Raw Data

Attachment 2 has the raw data in the Excel file entitled [LPunishEx1Data](#).

Experiment 2

Method

Participants and design

Two hundred participants (120 men and 80 women) were from the same population as in Experiment 1. The authors randomly assigned them to one of the four cells of a 2 (leader's resignation: yes vs. no) x 2 (threat by the leader: no vs. yes) between-participants design ($n_s = 50$ per cell).

Manipulation of the two factors

The authors prepared four vignettes in the same ways as in Experiment 1. Essentially, they crossed information about the leader's threat to those making the allegations and the investigating officers (i.e., threat) or his willingness to cooperate in the probe (i.e., no threat) with the previous *immediate resignation* and *hadn't resigned* levels of the leader's response to the same allegation. ([Attachment 3 reports the four vignettes used and the responses measured in Experiment 2](#)).

Measures and procedure

The authors sought answers to questions about the vignette and those implicated in it along similar scales and in ways as in Experiment 1. However, they made some changes in the manipulation check questions and measures of dispositional attribution and punishment as noted below.

To check on success of the manipulations, the authors included three questions (i.e., *how appropriate was the response?*; *did the leader threaten?*; and *was the leader willing to cooperate?*). The measure of dispositional attribution also included a new item of low consensus (i.e., *how likely is it that no leader would have done the same in this situation?*). The punishment measure retained the previous item of making *formal complaints against this leader* and added four new items (i.e., how much would you like that *others should spread bad*

words...?, ... this leader be removed from his position of power?; ... this leader be deprived of any party work?; and how much of this leader's power would you like to reduce?).

Raw Data

Attachment 4 has the raw data in the Excel file entitled [LPunishEx2Data](#).