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Fousiani, Kyriaki; van Prooijen, Jan-Willem

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**Punishment Reactions to Powerful Suspects: Comparing a “Corrupt” versus a
“Leniency” Approach of Power**

Kyriaki Fousiani¹

&

Jan-Willem van Prooijen²

¹Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

²Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences, Free University Amsterdam, The
Netherlands

*Correspondent Author: Kyriaki Fousiani, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences,
Department of Organizational Psychology, University of Groningen, The Netherlands, email:

k.fousiani@rug.nl

Conflict of Interest

Both Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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“Leniency” Approach of Power**

Abstract

This study aimed to replicate the Intuitive Retributivism Hypothesis, according to which people’s punitive sentiments are predominantly driven by retributive concerns. Contrary to prior research that focuses on how people punish offenders, this study investigated how people punish *suspects* of immoralities. Moreover, we manipulated a suspect’s power (high/ low/ undefined power) and stated contrasting hypotheses (the “power corrupts” approach vs. the “power leniency” approach) regarding the role of power on punishment motives. Finally, we investigated the mediating role of recidivism and guilt likelihood in these effects. The results replicated the Intuitive Retributivism Hypothesis and revealed the robustness of this effect. Moreover, in line with the “power corrupts” approach, we found that the role of utilitarian (but not retributive or restorative) motives is stronger in the punishment of powerful as opposed to powerless suspects. Unexpectedly, neither guilt likelihood nor recidivism of a suspect mediated the effects of power on punishment motives.

Keywords: power, motives for punishment, retribution, utilitarianism, restoration

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Problem

It is conventional legal wisdom that a person should not be convicted of a criminal offense that they did not commit. Although the justice system punishes transgressions only if an offender is guilty beyond any reasonable doubt (see Fousiani & Van Prooijen, 2019), there are situations where people judge actors whose guilt is not certain. For instance, Van Prooijen (2006) showed that people experienced stronger negative emotions and were more punitive against suspects whose guilt was uncertain when those suspects were outgroup rather than ingroup members. Numerous social factors may influence punitive reactions to suspected offenders. Most of these social factors are directly connected to the offense, such as severity of the harm done (e.g., Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Darley, 2002), the group membership of the suspect (Van Prooijen, 2006), or the institutional role of the punisher, such as being the leader or the follower (Wiltermuth & Flynn, 2013). In the present research, we investigate the motives that drive punitive reactions to powerful versus powerless suspects whose guilt is uncertain.

Review of Relevant Scholarship

Research has identified three distinct kinds of motives for punishment: utilitarian motives (Bentham, 1789), retributive or just deserts motives (Kant, 1797), and restorative or rehabilitation motives (De Beaumont & Tocqueville, 1833; Saleilles, 1898). *Utilitarian* motives for punishment aim to reduce the likelihood of offenses in the future, and thus seek to maximize happiness, and minimize suffering, in society (see Carlsmith & Darley, 2008; Nagin, 1998; Van Prooijen, 2018). The purpose of utilitarian punishments is to control the offenders’ behaviour by deterring future crimes (i.e., deterrence facet of utilitarianism) or by incapacitating a known liability to society (i.e., incapacitation facet of utilitarianism)

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(Carlsmith & Darley, 2008). Instead, *retributive/just deserts* punishments rest on the moral philosophy of deontology according to which punishment must be proportionate to the harm inflicted. Retributive punishment's objective is not preventing future offenses per se, but retaliating for perpetrators' past behaviour with the aim to rebalance feelings of justice and fairness (Goldberg, Lerner, & Tetlock., 1999; see also Van Prooijen, 2018). Finally, justice-seeking reactions directed at harm-doers can also involve motives for *restoration* (De Beaumont & Tocqueville, 1833; Saleilles, 1898). Restorative justice emphasizes the need to help harm-doers recognize the harm they have caused, to stimulate an apology to the victim and repair the relationship between the harm-doer and the victim, and to alter the harm-doer's future behaviour by means of adequate treatment (Zehr, 1997). Although restorative motives for punishment could be subsumed by utilitarian motives, we perceive them as qualitatively different given their inclusionary (i.e., help an offender reintegrate to society) rather than exclusionary (i.e., expel an offender from the society) approach towards offenders (Fousiani, Yzerbyt, Kteily, & Demoulin, 2019).

According to the social psychological literature, regardless of any characteristics of the suspect (e.g., power possession), observers display a generalized tendency to assign more retributive and less utilitarian or restorative motives for punishing the harm-doer, commonly referred to as the intuitive retributivism hypothesis. Indeed, people have a stronger intuitive need to punish past transgressions than to punish in order to prevent future harm-doing (Wenzel & Thielmann, 2006; see also Carlsmith, 2008; Carlsmith et al., 2002; Darley & Pittman, 2003). Moreover, they display an intuitive preference for proportionate rather than extreme sanctions, at least in recent survey experiments. We thus expect that overall, rates of retributive punishment motives will be higher than rates of utilitarian or restorative motives for sanctioning (*Hypothesis 1*).

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While the role of these motives in punitive intentions is well-established, much is yet unknown about the exact role that these motives play in the context of powerful suspects. Power is the ability to provide or withhold valued resources or administer punishments (Fiske, 1993; Kipnis, 1972), and the ability to produce intended effects (see Weber 1946). Accordingly, we see a powerful suspect as one who has access to valuable resources and can plan a course of action. Despite ample research on how lay people view powerful actors who are involved in corrupted or unethical behavior (Abrams, Palmer, Rutland, Cameron, & Van de Vyver, 2014; Hoyt, Price, & Poatsy, 2013; Kellerman, 2004) findings are controversial and conclusions inconsistent. In the present research, we examine people's punitive motives in response to powerful suspects when guilt has not been established with certainty. In the following, we present two contrasting approaches regarding the effects of power on observer's punitive reactions and motives, and we make competing hypotheses based on each approach.

The "Power Corrupts Hypothesis"

People engage in differential interpretations of harmdoers' actions based on their characteristics or background. For instance, people attribute higher intentionality to the actions of high status harmdoers (e.g., one who has prestige, respect, and esteem in the eyes of others; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009) than the identical actions of low status harmdoers, and consequently recommend more severe punishments for the former than the latter (Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009). In this study we focus on the effect of power (e.g., one's access to valuable resources, possibility to reward or punish others and produce intended outcomes; Fiske, 1993) of a suspect on observer's punitive reactions.¹ Power versus status are related yet distinct, as it is quite well possible to have control over other's resources (i.e., high

¹Research suggests that power and status can be differentially derived, experienced, and utilized by individuals, and, thus, there are important conceptual differences between them (Blader & Chen, 2012; Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012).

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power) while being held in low prestige (i.e., low status), and vice versa (Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012). Power provides the benefit of controlling one's own and others' monetary (e.g., salary), social (e.g., inclusion), or physical (e.g., housing) resources (Fiske, 1993; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). People who control the provision of resources are commonly in a position to directly affect the welfare of other individuals (Boles, Croson, & Murnighan, 2000; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008; Kipnis, 1972; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010; Pitesa & Thau, 2013). Moreover, powerful people are more susceptible to behaviors that they see as unethical, a form of moral hypocrisy (Lammers et al., 2010).

Partly due to their capacity to harm, people often are suspicious of the acts and motives of power holders. For instance, particularly when people feel powerless they are more likely to believe conspiracy theories that make assumptions of how powerful people jointly commit malpractice (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Van Prooijen, 2018). Therefore, powerless observers may be inherently suspicious of power holders and therefore relatively less willing to give them the benefit of the doubt when accused of unethical behavior. This is the essence of the "power corrupts hypothesis" of punitive reactions in situations where a target person's guilt is yet unproven: People are more likely to believe that a suspect is guilty when the suspect has high power relative to an observer than when the suspect has low power or suspect's power is undefined (*Hypothesis 2*).

Power holder's capacity to harm also has implications for perceivers' punishment motives. Research shows that retributive and utilitarian judgments are not diametric opposites as was till recently thought (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Carney & Mason, 2010) but rather orthogonal and independent constructs (Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Fleischmann, Lammers, Conway, & Galinsky, 2019). Accordingly, one would speculate that observer's punitive reactions towards a powerful suspect should be driven by various motives, including retributive and utilitarian motives. However, prior research reveals that when people experience an offence as

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highly dangerous or threatening to society they tend to assign strong utilitarian rather than retributive or restorative punishments to the offender (Fousiani et al., 2019). This happens because utilitarian, as opposed to alternative forms of punishment have a protective role to the society (i.e., the offender is excluded from society) and communicate the message that immoralities are not acceptable. In line with this reasoning, and if the “power corrupts hypothesis” were true, we propose that powerful suspects, as opposed to suspects with low or unidentified power, should be punished with stronger utilitarian rather than retributive or restorative punishments (*Hypothesis 3a*). In contrast, powerless suspects or suspects whose power position is undefined, are much less likely seen as a threat, since they are not associated with either the motive or the means to inflict serious harms (i.e., they do not have access to resources or their access to resources remains uncertain), and their ability to repeat a serious harm in the future is questioned. Hence, incapacitating a low power suspect or a suspect whose power position is unclear and deterring them from future crime should be a less plausible response of observers. Alternatively put, if a low power person or a person whose power position is unknown, did indeed inflict a serious harm, they should get their just deserts and pay for what they did, but people are less concerned about incapacitation of these low threatening suspects as those suspects have less access --or unclear access-- to the means necessary to re-offend. Therefore, observers should follow the pattern of the intuitive retributivism hypothesis and assign more retributive (rather than utilitarian or restorative) punishments towards those suspects, as opposed to powerful suspects, with the aim to make them pay for what they did (*Hypothesis 3b*). Consistent with this reasoning, we hypothesize that perceived a) guilt likelihood and b) recidivism of a suspect should mediate the effect of power on observer’s punishing motives. More specifically, we hypothesize that in a parallel mediation model a powerful, as opposed to a powerless suspect or a suspect with undefined

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power, will be seen as higher in guilt and as more prone to re-offend, which will, in turn, predict stronger utilitarian punishment motives (*Hypothesis 3c*).

The “Power Leniency Hypothesis”

Contrary to the “power corrupts hypothesis”, in real life there are many cases where powerful offenders are treated by lay observers more leniently as compared to their powerless counterparts. Powerful executives and public figures often face surprisingly few consequences from actions that can cost companies billions of dollars and thousands of employees their jobs. Such punitive leniency towards powerholders is also reflected in the research literature, where various studies find that people are more willing to accept transgressions from power holders (e.g., Abrams, Randsley de Moura, Marques, & Hutchison, 2008; Abrams, Travaglino, Marques, Pinto, & Levine, 2018). One explanation for the powerful offender leniency effect could be that people associate themselves more strongly with powerful or successful group members, perceive them as more similar to themselves and therefore overlook or justify negative behaviors they perform (cf. Basking in reflected glory; Cialdini, Borden, & Thorne, 1976). Indeed, in line with the liking-leniency hypothesis (Davis, Bray, & Holt, 1977), a likable defendant receives more lenient treatment from jurors than one who is disliked (see also Byrne, 1971; Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986; Kerr, Hymes, Anderson, & Weathers, 1995; Smeaton, Byrne, & Murnen, 1989). An alternative explanation is that because powerless people are highly dependent on powerful others and see them as a means to gain access to valuable resources (Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 1993; Kipnis, 1972; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) they instrumentally treat them more leniently than they treat powerless others.

Consequently, people sometimes make excuses for the powerful, try to overlook transgressions that powerful offenders have enacted, or at least see them as less immoral than they actually are. These insights are in line with the “power leniency hypothesis”: People are

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less likely to believe or admit that a high power suspect (as compared with a low power suspect or a suspect whose power position is undefined) is guilty (*Hypothesis 2_{alt}*). In line with this reasoning, one would expect that observers would be less motivated to punish, control, or correct the behavior of powerful suspects (vs. powerless suspects or suspects with undefined power position) and would be therefore less inclined to assign any kind of punishments (utilitarian, retributive, or restorative) towards them (*Hypothesis 3a_{alt}*). In contrast, we hypothesize that motives for punishment should be in line with the intuitive retributivism hypothesis --that retributive motives are more potent in driving punishment than utilitarian or restorative motives-- when suspects are low in power or when their power position is unclear (*Hypothesis 3b*). Finally, we hypothesize that guilt likelihood of a suspect will mediate the effect of power on punishment motives. More specifically, a suspect's low or undefined (vs. high) power should lead to stronger guilt likelihood, which will in turn, lead to stronger retributive punishment motives (*Hypothesis 4*).

All in all, depending on whether the “power corrupts” or “power leniency” approach holds, powerful suspects will be mostly assigned with either utilitarian or restorative punishments respectively. In sharp contrast, powerless suspects, but also suspects whose power stance is unclear, regardless of the approach, will be always particularly assigned punishments that are proportionate to the inflicted harm (i.e., retributive). After all, observers would see those suspects less as a threat --since they lack access to valuable resources or their access to resources is not clear—and thus would be less inclined to treat them harshly.

In this study, we examined the effect of power (high vs. low vs. undefined) of a suspect on observers' (1) guilt likelihood, and (2) motives for punishment in a simple experimental design. The mediating role of guilt likelihood and recidivism of a suspect is also investigated. The offense that we used in this study was money embezzlement from an organization.

Materials and Methods

Sampling Plan / Data collection / Data acquisition

A total of 326 British participants (180 females and 146 males) living in the United Kingdom took part in this study. All participants were adults ($M_{age} = 54.75$, $SD = 14.22$) and their mother language was English. No other exclusion criteria were applied.²

The study was programmed on Qualtrics. Contrary to the preregistered data collection plan, the data collection for this study was carried out and funded by PsychLab, a service of the Leibniz Institute for Psychology Information (ZPID). Moreover, due to the survey programming that the ZPID used, the integration of systems (Qualtrics and panel management software), and the high number of concurrent invitations that were sent with the aim to achieve the intended sample size, the final sample was $N = 326$ instead of $N = 300$ that was initially planned³.

Conditions and Design

We manipulated the suspect's social power (high vs. low vs. undefined power) in vignettes. Participants read a scenario (in English) that presents the main character (i.e., suspect) as a powerful manager (high power) versus a powerless bookkeeper (low power) working at a large governmental organization. Detailed information about the main character's possession of power is included in the instructions (see Appendix I). In the undefined power condition (control group) participants read that the suspect works at the same organization but his role is undefined. Participants read that the main character has been accused of having embezzled large sums of money from that organization which he has

² Power analyses regarding the determination of the sample size for this study are presented in the online supplemental material.

³ ZPID purchases samples for online studies from a commercial panel provider (respondi). Respondi adheres to certain standards for online access panels determined by ISO 20252:2019. These standards require access to full disclosure of incentive terms and conditions applying to the project in the invitation email that contains the link to the survey. Incentives are provided in the form of tokens or bonus points that, after a certain amount has been accumulated, can be monetized, transformed into a voucher or donated (choice of the participant).

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transferred to private accounts. Following Van Prooijen's (2006) manipulation of guilt probability, we informed participants that the strength of the evidence about the suspect's guilt is mixed. In other words, the evidence about the suspect's guilt was suggestive but not fully conclusive. Therefore, it was not entirely certain whether the suspect was innocent or guilty of having embezzled money from the governmental organization. As a manipulation check for social power, we asked participants to indicate the job role of the suspect as either a "manager," an "employee", or "unknown/unidentified". Moreover, participants answered a guilt probability item: "What does the evidence say about his guilt?" certainly innocent / mixed evidence / certainly guilty (see Van Prooijen, 2006; Appendix I).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions. The study was anonymous, and participation was voluntary. Participants were thanked and debriefed after filling in the questionnaire. Consistent with the code of ethics, this project was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychology of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands.

Measures

Guilt Likelihood. We measured guilt likelihood of the suspect with two items: "How likely do you think it is that Harry Smith is factually guilty of money embezzlement?" and "How confident are you that Harry actually embezzled the money?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). We averaged the two items into a guilt likelihood scale ($\alpha = .81$).

Recidivism. We measured a suspect's recidivism with three items: "How likely do you think it is that" ...1) "...Harry Smith will embezzle money in the future"; 2) "...Harry Smith will do a similar offense in the future?"; 3) "...Harry Smith will re-offend?" (1 = not at all, 7= very much). We averaged the three items into a recidivism scale ($\alpha = .96$).

Motives for Punishment. We used the 16-item motives for punishment scale (Fousiani & Demoulin, 2019; Fousiani & Van Prooijen, 2019; Fousiani, Yzerbyt, Kteily, & Demoulin,

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2019) to assess the various motives for punishment, including (a) utilitarian motives and its sub-dimensions (private deterrence, public deterrence, and incapacitation⁴) ($\alpha = .94$), (b) retributive motives ($\alpha = .92$), and (c) restorative motives ($\alpha = .85$) for punishment (1 = absolutely disagree, 7 = absolutely agree). We averaged utilitarian, retributive, and restorative items into a utilitarian, retributive and restorative motives for punishment subscale respectively (see Appendix II for the complete scales).

Results

Correlations between the study variables, means, and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. None of the participants failed the manipulation checks and thus, none of them were excluded from further statistical analysis.

Motives for Punishment

To test Hypothesis 1, participants' scores were submitted to an ANOVA with repeated measures on the three motives for punishment scales. As expected, the motive main effect proved significant, $F(2,634) = 56.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$. In line with Hypothesis 1, a first contrast (C1) comparing retributive motives to utilitarian and restorative motives confirmed that participants reported higher retributive than utilitarian or restorative motives for punishing the suspect, $F(1, 317) = 164.70, p < .001, \eta^2 = .34$. The second contrast (C2) comparing utilitarian and restorative motives was not significant, $F(1, 317) = 1.46, p = .23, \eta^2 = .005$. These results provide support for Hypothesis 1 and replicate the intuitive retributivism hypothesis.

Power and Guilt Likelihood of a Suspect

⁴ The literature distinguishes between deterrent private, deterrent public, and incapacitative motives for punishment. All these motives aim at controlling harm-doer's future behavior and are therefore included under the umbrella of utilitarian motives for punishment (see Carlsmith & Darley, 2008). In line with prior research (Fousiani & Demoulin, 2019; Fousiani & Van Prooijen, 2019; Fousiani et al, 2019) we did not refer to each of those dimensions separately; Instead, we calculated a general mean, indicating utilitarian motives for punishment.

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To test Hypotheses 2 and its alternative we performed a univariate ANOVA with power (high, low, undefined) as the independent variable and guilt likelihood as the dependent variable. Participants reported a stronger guilt likelihood when the suspect was high ($M= 4.37$, $SD= 1.01$) as opposed to low in power ($M= 3.53$, $SD= 1.17$), $F(2, 323) = 17.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. However, there was no difference between the high power and undefined power ($M= 4.20$, $SD= 1.08$) groups. These results partly supported Hypothesis 2 (in line with the power corrupts approach) and not Hypothesis 2_{alt} (the power leniency approach). Specifically, results revealed the predicted difference between high versus low power suspects; responses towards the suspect with undefined power mirrored those towards the high power suspect, however, which was unexpected.

Power and Motives for Punishment

To test Hypothesis 3a and its alternative and Hypothesis 3b, we conducted a 3 (motives for punishment: retributive, utilitarian, restorative) by 3 (power of the suspect: high, low, undefined) mixed ANOVA, with motives for punishment varying within participants and power between them. The multivariate interaction effect was significant $F(4, 630) = 3.75$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .023$. As predicted, the univariate effect of utilitarian motives proved significant $F(2, 315) = 7.16$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$ and showed that participants assigned stronger utilitarian punishments towards a high as opposed to low power suspect $F(1, 212) = 9.92$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .045$, while the mean difference between the high power and undefined power groups was not significant, $F(1, 212) = .02$, $p = .88$, $\eta^2 = .00$. Moreover, the mean difference between low and undefined power groups did prove significant $F(1, 206) = 12.29$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .056$, and showed that observers punish undefined suspects with stronger utilitarian punishments compared to low power suspects. The univariate effect of retributive motives $F(2, 315) = .81$, $p = .45$, $\eta^2 = .005$ or restorative motives $F(2, 315) = .21$, $p = .81$, $\eta^2 = .001$ did not prove to be significant (Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2). These results partly

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supported hypothesis 3a as opposed to 3a_{alt}. In sum, while evidence supports the intuitive retributivism hypothesis overall (Hypothesis 1), it is not the case that retributive motives are susceptible to information about an offender's power position.

The Mediating Effects of Guilt Likelihood and Recidivism

In order to test Hypothesis 3c, we performed a parallel mediation analysis with Process, Model 4 (Hayes, 2013). Power of the suspect (undefined power was coded as 0, low power was coded as 1, and high power was coded as 2) was the independent variable, guilt likelihood and recidivism of the suspect were the mediators and utilitarian motives for punishment was the dependent variable. Results did not provide support for Hypothesis 3c as the total effect of the mediation analysis was not significant (see Table 3 for the relevant statistics).

Given that power did not produce any significant effects on either retributive or restorative motives for punishment, and given that neither guilt likelihood nor recidivism mediated the effects of power on punishment motives, we did not test Hypothesis 4.

Further Exploratory Analyses

Finally, we performed additional exploratory analyses comparing the strength of correlations (using Fisher's r-to-z-tests) to test whether utilitarian motives for punishing powerful suspects correlated more strongly (than retributive or restorative motives) with guilt likelihood and recidivism of powerful suspects, and whether restorative or retributive motives for punishing powerful suspects correlated less strongly (than utilitarian) with guilt likelihood and recidivism of powerful suspects (power corrupts approach).

Results showed that utilitarian motives for punishing powerful suspects correlate more strongly with guilt likelihood of powerful suspects ($r = .57, p < .001$) than retributive ($r = .31, p = .001$) or restorative motives ($r = .08, p > .05$), $z = 2.39, p = .009$. Moreover, utilitarian motives correlated more strongly with recidivism of powerful suspects ($r = .54, p < .001$) than

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retributive ($r = .22, p < .05$) or restorative motives ($r = .02, p > .05$), $z = 2.73, p = .003$. We found similar effects for powerless suspects, however: utilitarian motives correlated more strongly with guilt likelihood ($r = .51, p < .001$) than retributive ($r = .14, p > .05$) or restorative motives ($r = -.04, p > .05$), $z = 2.87, p = .002$. Moreover, utilitarian motives for punishing powerless suspects correlated more strongly with recidivism of powerless suspects ($r = .54, p < .001$) than retributive ($r = .18, p > .05$) or restorative motives ($r = .009, p > .05$), $z = 2.92, p = .002$. Similarly, utilitarian motives for punishing suspects with undefined power correlated more strongly with guilt likelihood ($r = .39, p < .001$) as compared with retributive ($r = .07, p > .05$) and restorative motives ($r = -.17, p > .05$), $z = 2.25, p = .01$. Moreover, utilitarian motives for punishing undefined suspects correlated more strongly with recidivism of those suspects ($r = .37, p < .001$) as compared with retributive ($r = .05, p > .05$) and restorative motives ($r = -.13, p > .05$), $z = 2.27, p = .01$.

Finally, we performed similar exploratory analyses to test whether utilitarian motives for punishment correlate more strongly with recidivism and guilt likelihood of powerful, as compared with powerless and undefined suspects (power corrupts approach). Results showed that utilitarian motives do not correlate with either guilt likelihood ($z = 1.24, p = .11$) or recidivism of powerful suspects more strongly as compared with powerless or undefined suspects ($z = 0, p = .50$).

Discussion

People's punitive reactions towards offenders are by default more retributive than utilitarian or restorative. Indeed, according to the so-called "intuitive retributivism hypothesis" retribution-relevant concerns are more important than utilitarianism or restoration-relevant concerns and have a primacy in influencing people's willingness to punish offenders (Carlsmith, 2008; Carlsmith et al., 2002; Wenzel & Thielmann, 2006). However, more often than not, people are faced with situations where a person's guilt is

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uncertain. The current work aims at replicating the “Intuitive Retributivism Hypothesis” when the person to be judged is not certainly guilty but rather a *suspect* of immoralities. In line with our first hypothesis and replicating the intuitive retributivism hypothesis, people assigned stronger retributive than utilitarian or restorative motives for punishing suspects of immoral doing. Importantly, this effect size was rather large, providing evidence for the robustness of the intuitive retributivism effect. These results are particularly important in the context of testing the retributivism hypothesis as they reveal people’s tendency to treat one proportionately to what one is accused of having done, no matter whether these accusations stem from one’s factual guilt or not.

Moreover, this study extends previous findings on the intuitive retributivism hypothesis by investigating the underlying motives (retributive, utilitarian or restorative) for which one punishes powerful versus powerless suspects or suspects whose power is undefined (control condition), and the guilt likelihood that people attribute to those suspects, by contrasting two different theoretical approaches to power: the “power corrupts” versus the “power leniency” approach. The results obtained in this experiment are more consistent with the claims of the “power corrupts” approach (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Fragale et al, 2009; Karelaia & Keck, 2013) and show that people report stronger guilt likelihood for powerful as opposed to powerless suspects (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore, people have stronger utilitarian motives to punish powerful (as opposed to powerless) suspects (Hypothesis 3a). Contrary to the “power leniency” approach of punishment (Abrams et al., 2008; Abrams et al., 2018; Hypothesis 3a_{alt}), however, observers were not less motivated to punish powerful suspects (vs. powerless suspects or suspects with undefined power position) with any kind of punishments (utilitarian, retributive, or restorative). These findings are particularly important for the intuitive retributivism hypothesis as they suggest that power of a suspect does not

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influence people's intuitive retributivism but only has an effect on people's utilitarian motives for punishment.

Powerful people, due to their access to resources and control over others (Dahl, 1957; Fiske, 1993; see also Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) have ample possibilities to promote self-interested goals at the cost of the collective interest (see Blader & Yap, 2016; Boles et al., 2000; Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Kipnis, 1972; Piff et al., 2012). Being a *suspect* of immoral acts is a sufficient condition to elicit strong negative reactions on the part of an observer, such as to perceive the suspect as factually guilty and to assign stronger utilitarian motives for punishment. In other words, the mere suspicion of immorality makes observers less willing to assign a possible high-power (as opposed to low-power) offender the benefit of the doubt. Therefore, observers are more prone to constrain powerful as opposed to powerless suspects by assigning utilitarian rather than retributive or restorative punishment, which is deemed a more efficient method to control crime as it incapacitates the offender (e.g., incarceration) and deters future crime (e.g., disproportionately harsh punishments or public punishments that aim to set an example to others).

Contrary to Hypothesis 3c, neither guilt likelihood nor recidivism of powerful suspects mediated the effects of power on utilitarian motives for punishment. As such, the present data show that neither of these variables explain the effects of power of a suspect on people's punishing reactions. Indeed, it is possible that people do not punish powerful suspects because of their high guilt likelihood or their propensity to re-offend –after all, people wish to punish guilty targets or re-current offenders no matter what their power status is-- but because they might perceive powerful suspects as more dangerous for the society or might *demonize* (Baumeister, 1997) them and see them as evil individuals who take pleasure into hurting others (see Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008). Observers therefore, may be more willing to incapacitate them with utilitarian punishments. Future research should further investigate

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which psychological mechanisms explain the effects of power of a suspect on punishment motives. Finally, we did not find support for Hypothesis 3b, that observers should follow the pattern of the intuitive retributivism hypothesis and assign more retributive (than utilitarian or restorative) punishments towards powerless suspects and suspects with undefined power, as opposed to powerful suspects. These findings suggest that although power of a suspect does influence people's desire to assign utilitarian punishments, it does not influence people's intuitive reaction to suspects. It should be noted, however, that the effect size was rather small, and therefore future research should investigate this topic, optimally with behavioral in addition to self-reported measures of punishment motives. In a similar vein, the results we obtained by the exploratory analyses show that utilitarian motives for punishing either powerful or powerless suspects and suspects with undefined power correlate more strongly with a suspect's guilt likelihood and recidivism than retributive or restorative motives do. Interestingly, the correlation coefficients are particularly strong for powerful and powerless suspects but less strong when suspects' power is undefined. These findings are consistent with arguments that both high and low power yield unique psychological dynamics that researchers may need to examine (cf. Schaerer et al., 2018), and more specifically reveal that information about a suspect's power, be it high or low power, plays an important role in shaping people's reaction to suspects of immoralities.

This research makes at least three novel theoretical contributions. First and foremost, we tested the intuitive retributivism hypothesis (Carlsmith, 2008; Carlsmith et al., 2002; Wenzel & Thielmann, 2006; see also Fousiani et al., 2019) in the context of punishing a *suspect of immoralities* and we were able to replicate it. Moreover, we extended previous research on people's motives for punishing immoral-doers by manipulating a suspect's power. Although prior research has already shown that powerful offenders are punished more severely as compared with powerless offenders (Fragale et al, 2009), this is the first study to

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investigate the *motives* for which observers punish powerholders who are suspect of immoralities. Importantly, we found that power of a suspect does not influence observers' retributive reaction to those suspects and therefore, we conclude that intuitive retributivism is not sensitive to power differences. Finally, this study disentangles two opposing approaches to power and provides evidence in favor of the "power corrupts" over the "power leniency" approach.

This research includes several limitations. First and foremost, to test Hypotheses 1 and 3, this study compares the scales of retributive, utilitarian, and restorative motives with each other as in Fousiani et al. (2019). This is a limitation as these motives have been measured by different items that are not related to each other. Future research should address this limitation and find alternative ways to compare people's various motives for punishing an offender. Furthermore, we focused on observer's self-reported punitive motivations and we did not use any behavioral punishing measures in the current work. Since self-reported answers may be exaggerated or include biases, such as social desirability, influencing the results, future research should replicate these findings with behavioral measures. Moreover, this research manipulated the offense through vignettes and therefore we can only draw conclusions about how independent and emotionally uninvolved participants respond to these issues, but not how actual decision-makers punish, or how emotionally involved victims respond. This contribution hence needs to be seen as a preliminary step towards a more complete understanding of the relationship between power and people's responses to suspected immoral-doers. Besides, the findings of this study come from research in the lab, which is often detached from reality. Future research needs to combine field with lab studies in order to better understand the effects of power on people's reactions to suspects of immoralities. Furthermore, although this study has a large sample size, which consists of a relatively equal number of males and females, the participants of this study come from the U.K., a rather

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individualistic country (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Previous research suggests that individualism is associated with personal responsibility for one's actions (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000) and it might therefore predict harsher punitive reactions to suspects of immoralities. Future research should replicate these results in collectivistic countries as well. Finally, it is noteworthy that the mean age of the participants of this study is on the high side, meaning that participants' reactions to powerful suspects might have been influenced by the participants' age. Future research should include a more balanced number of participants in terms of age.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings of this study replicate the intuitive retributivism hypothesis and show that people assign stronger retributive rather than utilitarian or restorative punishments to suspects of immoralities. These results are in line with prior research (see also Fousiani et al., 2019) and reveal the robustness of the intuitive retributivism effect. However, information about a suspect's power prompts an observer to assign stronger utilitarian rather than retributive or restorative punishments. These results reveal that observers' motives for punishing high power suspects are grounded on a perception of the powerful as corrupt individuals who are susceptible to break the rules and thus deserve to be constrained rather than punished with the default pattern of retribution. Alternatively put, in line with the "power corrupts" and contrary to the "power leniency" approach, people are more prone to punish powerful, as opposed to powerless suspects, with the aim to incapacitate them and deter them from re-offending rather than pay them back for what they did.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards and Open Access Practices:

This research involves human participants. All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This project has been approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychology of the University of Groningen, The Netherlands.

The research reported in this article was preregistered (osf.io/h9m57). We declare that we did not deviate from our preregistration in the analyses we performed. We did deviate from our preregistration in our data collection. We explain and justify these deviations transparently in our methods. Our study material and raw data (including codebook) are available under osf.io/h9m57.

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Table 1.

Pearson Correlations Coefficients Between Study Variables, Means, and Standard Deviations.

	1	2	3	4	5	M (SD)
1. Retributive	1	.43***	.42***	.16**	.15**	5.31 (1.39)
2. Utilitarian		1	.13*	.52***	.50***	4.39 (1.41)
3. Restorative			1	-.05	-.03	4.52 (1.48)
4. Guilt likelihood				1	.69***	4.04 (1.14)
5. Recidivism					1	3.75 (1.44)

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2.

Means and Standard Deviations for Motives for Punishment across Experimental Conditions.

	<i>High power</i>		<i>Low power</i>		<i>Undefined power</i>	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Utilitarian motives	4.58	1.50	3.97	1.32	4.61	1.31
Retributive motives	5.20	1.37	5.27	1.48	5.44	1.31
Restorative motives	4.47	1.47	4.59	1.56	4.50	1.42

Note. All ratings were on 7-point scales ranging from 1 = absolutely disagree to 7 =

absolutely agree.

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Table 3.

Mediation Results with Power as Predictor, Guilt Likelihood and Recidivism as Mediators, and Utilitarian Motives for Punishment as Dependent Variable.

Effects of Power on Utilitarian motives	Total effect	Direct effect (c')	Unstandardized paths		Indirect effect	
			a	b	Estimate	BCA CI
<i>Guilt likelihood</i>	.009(.10)	-.05 (.08)	.09 (.08)	.41 (.08)***	-.05 (.02)	-.10 - .006
<i>Recidivism</i>			.01 (.01)	.27 (.06)***	-.01 (.02)	-.05 .02

Notes. Standard errors in parentheses (bootstrap standard errors for the indirect effect estimate); BCA CI: bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence interval; paths a and b correspond to the prediction coefficients of the independent variable to the mediator (path a) and of the mediator to the dependent variable (path b).

Undefined power was coded as 0, low power was coded as 1, and high power was coded as 2.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.