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## Rule Violations Checked if High Status

Michael Kruepke and Aron Barbey  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,  
Champaign, IL, USA

### Synonyms

[Cheating](#); [Dominance theory](#); [Rules violations](#); [Status](#)

### Definition

The idea that individuals of high standing in a social hierarchy check for and remember rule violations of relatively lower-status individuals.

### Introduction

The ability to detect rule violations is often seen as necessary to the development of social contracts. Specifically, cooperation and reciprocity are typically understood to depend on the ability of group members to identify and penalize social rule violations. In this regard, it is crucial to detect and remember cheaters, those who (intentionally) violate social rules. Importantly, in communal species such as our own, the social environment is governed, in part, by a social hierarchy wherein

some members occupy higher levels of status. In this context, higher-status individuals have been hypothesized to maintain their priority access to resources (e.g., food, mates) by increased detection and memory of lower-status cheaters (Cummins 1999). Evidence in support of this claim is reviewed as well as investigations indicating that social status may not have an impact on cheater detection. In addition, insights from the broader domain of cheater detection, unconcerned with social status, are detailed, indicating that identification, memory, and penalization of cheaters is a complex process in need of continued study. Finally, the various methods of measuring social status in humans are noted, providing avenues for future exploration into the role of social status in cheater detection.

### High-Status Individuals and Cheaters

While there are numerous accounts in social animals, such as primates, investigating and supporting the idea that high-status individuals are more likely to check for and detect cheaters of lower-status there have been relatively few empirical investigations in humans. Indeed, it appears the oft-cited Cummins' (1999) is the only published work empirically and explicitly investigating the effect of social status on checking for and detecting cheaters in humans (although see Fiddick and Cummins 2001 for discussion of conceptually similar studies

demonstrating mixed results). In specific, Cummins conducted two experiments wherein the relative status of subjects was manipulated in a Wason Card Selection Task. In the first experiment, subjects had to test compliance with a college dormitory rule (i.e., if someone is assigned to tutor a study session, that person is required to tape record the session) and were split into four conditions:

**High-status:** Subjects engage the task as a high-status individual (Resident Assistant) checking on lower-status individuals (Students).

**Low-status:** Subjects engage the task as a Student checking on Resident Assistants.

**High-status Equal:** Subjects engage the task as a Resident Assistant checking on fellow Resident Assistants.

**Low-status Equal:** Subjects engage the task as a Student checking on fellow Students.

In all conditions, save for the High-status condition, 15–20 % of subjects used a cheater detection strategy. In contrast, 65 % used a cheater detection strategy when engaging the task as a high-status individual checking on lower-status individuals. Thus, subjects were significantly more likely to look for cheaters when checking on individuals who were of relatively lower status. The second experiment was identical to the first with one important change: in this version, subjects were initially asked to engage the task from a high-status perspective and then switch to a low-status perspective. This ordering was reversed for half the participants and a distraction task was used between perspectives to decrease the chance of carry-over effects. When subjects engaged the task as a low-status individual first, 41 % used a cheater detection strategy. After switching to a high-status position, this percentage increased significantly to 65 %. Thus, in the same person a cheater detection strategy was more likely to be employed when they were a high-status person investigating low-status individuals. When taking the High-status perspective first, 50 % used a cheater detection strategy and 40 % continued to use this strategy even after being

placed in the lower-status position. This was a nonsignificant decrease and was taken to indicate that once cheater detection is engaged in a high-status position, it is difficult to disengage regardless of any change in relative social status.

In contrast to Cummins, which directly assessed checking for cheaters by high-status individuals, most investigations into this effect have relied on memory paradigms focused on pictures of people's faces. In these tasks, subjects are typically presented with pictures of faces alongside descriptions of cheating, trustworthy, or neutral acts and tested for their memory of these faces after a time interval (e.g., a few minutes to a week). The central idea being that individuals using a cheater detection strategy should have better memory for faces matched with descriptions of cheating (i.e., cheaters). When social status is manipulated in these tasks, it is typically done via the job title given in the character descriptions (e.g., low-status job: baseball game vendor, high-status job: bishop). Using this technique, Mealey and colleagues (1996) found, in line with Cummins' results, significantly better memory for faces of low-status cheaters compared to high-status or noncheaters. These results, along with Cummins', are typically cited as evidence that high-status individuals are more likely to detect and remember low-status cheaters.

Despite the widespread citation of Cummins and Mealey et al.'s findings, recent investigations have noted areas of concern and have failed to replicate key status-related results. In this regard, Mealey and colleague's findings have been the main focus of examination, with apparently no studies attempting to replicate Cummins' findings. For example, Mehl and Buchner (2008) detail several areas of concern regarding the methods reported by Mealey et al. noting that the behavior and character description stimuli were not fully reported and that those descriptions that were reported differed in length and amount of detail, which may make some stimuli easier to remember. In a similar vein, Barclay and Lalumière (2006) comment that cheaters in Mealey et al.'s stimuli may be more salient, and thus more memorable, because their actions, in comparison to cooperators', are more intense,

with cheaters not only breaking small social rules but also engaging in more threatening or physically dangerous behaviors such as robbery or child molestation.

Beyond these concerns, and more importantly, six experiments across three studies have failed to replicate Mealey et al.'s results regarding high-status individuals (i.e., experiments 1 and 2 in Barclay and Lalumière 2006; experiment 4 in Buchner et al. 2009; experiments 1, 2, and 3 in Mehl and Buchner 2008 – experiment 3 did find better memory for faces associated with high-status professions, but there was no interaction with cheating or trustworthy behavior). These studies not only attempted replications they also sought to control for and assess potentially confounding variables such as sex of participant, sex of the face used in the stimuli, attractiveness and likability of the faces used, and time interval between initial display of the stimuli and memory testing. Overall, these results indicate that Mealey et al.'s findings may be singular or that there are influences in the original finding that are currently unaccounted for. Given this, and the lack of replication of Cummins findings, evidence to-date is equivocal that higher-status individuals preferentially check for or have greater memory for lower-status cheaters.

## Complexities in Cheater Detection

The discussion of whether social status impacts cheater detection is necessarily couched within the much larger and historic debate on whether humans possess a cognitive mechanism specifically for detecting cheaters. While not able to engage this broader debate in full, the studies using the memory paradigm detailed in Mealey et al., although unable to confirm the impact of social status on cheater detection, do indicate that detecting cheaters is a highly complex process. For example, Chiappe et al. (2004) found that people see it as subjectively more important to remember cheaters than cooperators and that this was more evident when there were larger amounts of resources involved. They also noted that cheaters were looked at longer than cooperators,

that subjects were more likely to remember the faces of cheaters, and that cheating behavior was more likely to be remembered. Put another way, Chiappe and colleagues found that cheaters are remembered more and that individual (i.e., subjective importance and visual attention) and contextual variables (i.e., amount of resources involved) may moderate this effect.

In contrast to these results, Buchner and colleagues (2009), across four separate experiments, were unable to detect evidence of improved memory for cheaters despite also investigating the impact of various stimuli features such as attractiveness, likability, different intervals of memory retention, and whether the behavior described in the stimuli was exceptional or ordinary. They did, however, find evidence of improved memory for the conditions or features under which people did cheat, also known as source memory. In other words, people did not show improved memory for cheaters, but did show improved memory for the situations or context the cheaters acted in. Lastly, and importantly, Barclay (2008) demonstrated that the ability to remember cheaters or cooperators may be related to their rarity. Specifically, in this study, cheaters were remembered best when they were rare but worst when they were common, with the same being true of cooperators. These results suggest that people remember whatever behavior is rarest regardless of whether that behavior is cheating or cooperating. Overall, this collection of results demonstrates that cheater detection is shaped and dictated by a host of individual and situational variables.

Moreover, the often implicit but sometimes explicit assumption is that cheaters, especially lower-status cheaters, will be punished or penalized when detected. In stark contrast to this, Fiddick et al. (2013) has documented the cross-cultural presence of *noblesse oblige*, the tendency or obligation of higher-status individuals to be more tolerant of and generous to lower-status individual's, even if they cheat. Thus, even if status does not impact the detection of cheaters, it may effect the actions taken once they are detected.

## The Many Faces of Status

The evidence so far indicates, in a somewhat contradictory fashion, that cheater detection may not be influenced by social status in humans but that it may be influenced by a host of other individual and situational variables. In this context, it is important to note the way social status has been manipulated or investigated up to this point. Specifically, in all of the studies described here status was manipulated via occupation or income. In contrast to this, literature and research on social status in humans indicates that an individual's position in the social hierarchy is determined by a variety of connected, yet independent, constructs, such as power, socioeconomic status, dominance, prestige, influence, and leadership (Blader and Chen 2014). Adding to the complexity of this picture is the fact that while social status is often discussed as a dispositional trait, it is also highly situational, such that an individual may be of high status in one environment (e.g., friend group or family) but low status in another (e.g., occupation). In this regard, the concepts and methods used to assess the impact of status have been relatively narrow.

## Conclusion

Evidence in humans is currently equivocal as to whether high-status individuals display an increased detection or memory of lower-status cheaters. At the same time, the methods used to investigate the effect of status have been relatively narrow and numerous studies have demonstrated the impact of various individual and situational variables on cheater detection. Further clarity on the influence of status on cheater detection could be achieved through boarder investigation into the numerous ways social status is determined in human hierarchies and by more diverse methods of inquiry.

## Cross-References

► [Higher Status in Group](#)

- [Rule Violation](#)
- [Rule Violations Not Checked if Low-status](#)
- [Social Contract Rule Violation](#)
- [Social Reasoning Affected by Rank \(Mealey, Daood, Krage, 1996\)](#)
- [Status and Dominance Hierarchies](#)
- [Status Competition](#)
- [Status of Cheater](#)

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