

Punish the shirkers! Especially the low-status ones

It's common for politicians to promise to crack down on perceived shirkers or freeloaders – people accused of consuming too much of the benefits that society produces, while contributing too little to the production of these benefits. The accused are usually of low social status. Ronald Reagan famously denounced 'welfare queens', and David Cameron has recently been targeting 'shirkers' who prefer welfare to work. This focus on low status shirkers is not just a habit of the right; witness the harsh policies that Stalin employed to discourage shirking by peasants on collective farms.

From an evolutionary perspective, it's not surprising that leaders can often please their followers by combatting freeloaders. Behavioral scientists refer to such low contributors as 'free riders', and recognize them as the central problem of group cooperation. When group-produced resources benefit all members equally (public goods), lower contributors have higher benefit-to-contribution ratios and thus reap higher net benefits. So free riders are advantaged over high contributors, and unless high contributors can solve this problem, they'll be exploited to extinction. One solution—as much of my own research suggests—is for high contributors to experience punitive sentiment towards free riders. This sentiment may lead you to punish free riders yourself – perhaps in some low-cost manner like discrete ostracization, or maybe in a more confrontational way. Alternatively, this sentiment may lead you to support a leader who promises to do the dirty work of punishment for you.

Note that nothing in the above definition of 'free rider'—a member with a relatively high benefit-to-contribution ratio—implies that the free rider must be low-status. In fact, high-status members are often especially well-positioned to obtain high benefit-to-contribution ratios, because they tend to reap the largest shares of group resources. Some political efforts have attempted to paint high-status recipients of government favor as freeloaders, for example accusations of 'corporate welfare' made consistently by the American left over the past several decades. But the public tends to get more fired up by attacks that target low-status 'welfare queens' rather than freeloading fat cats. For managerial free riding to elicit widespread outrage, it has to be *really* bad – bad enough to render a decidedly negative benefit-to-contribution ratio. That is, when Sir Fred Goodwin received £16 million upon leaving RBS, people were angry not because his contribution to the firm had been modest, but because it had been massively negative (he'd overseen the greatest annual corporate loss in UK history). When you're that high-status, what tends to upset people isn't large reward for small success, but rather large reward for catastrophic failure.

Could this apparent pattern of relative leniency towards high-status freeloaders be some kind of illusion? Experimental evidence suggests otherwise. There were two particularly important studies on this in the late 1990s, and both suggested that low-status free riders really do get singled out. One of these was an experiment by Linda Mealey and colleagues, in which participants viewed a series of faces, and the owner of each face was described as either (a) a cheater or a cooperator, or (b) high-

status or low-status. When participants returned to the lab a week later to try and identify the faces they had seen before, they tended to remember the cheaters better than the cooperators, but only the low-status cheaters; memory was not enhanced for high-status cheaters. The second study, by Denise Cummins, incorporated something called a 'Wason selection task', which has been famously used to demonstrate that people are much better at solving logical problems when these problems are presented in the context of detecting a cheater on a social contract. Cummins added the twist that cheaters were portrayed as being either high-status or low-status, relative to the person trying to detect them; results suggested that cheater detection ability was enhanced only when cheaters were lower-status.

Why would people be so inclined to overlook high-status cheating? Because high-status people make frightening enemies and valuable allies. They're relatively capable of retaliating against their accusers, which makes accusing them a risky proposition. They're also relatively useful to have on your side, which provides stronger incentives to avoid conflicts with them. Indeed, a recent study by Michael Bang Peterson and colleagues suggests that a punisher will be more lenient, if he or she regards a punishee as a more valuable long-term associate.

In sum, although there's no reason to expect for low-status people to free ride more often than high-status people, there is reason to expect that they'll get accused of it and punished for it more often. This bias serves the interests of punishers; low-status people make easier, safer, and cheaper targets. When politicians speak of punishing free riders, they portray it as a matter of fairness, but their moralizing is too often undermined by a status-based selectivity that isn't fair at all.