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**Cognitive and emotional reactions to political  
scandals and the moderating effects of social  
identity and moral dispositions**

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## Abstract

Although political scandals are a central topic in news media communication about politics, we know little about recipients' psychological reactions to these. In our study, we investigated how norm violations of politicians are evaluated by lay persons. Participants ( $N = 343$ ) were confronted with an alleged newspaper report about a fictitious politician's behavior. The report was either about the politician's holiday habits (control condition) or about the politician's abuse of public funds (experimental condition). Additionally, we manipulated the sharedness of social identity between the recipient and the transgressing politician. As expected, in the experimental condition, participants reported higher moral outrage and a higher value threat compared to the control group. Both effects were moderated by justice sensitivity from an observer perspective as a personality disposition. Moreover, participants in the experimental condition reported an increased threat of political trust, particularly if their general political trust had been low before. Social identity did not affect the dependent variables.

*Keywords:* Political scandal, justice notions, social identity, moral emotions, political trust

### **Political Scandals and Norm Violations**

Under the title “Flight-affair – Rau with refinement retouched,” the German News magazine Focus published an article about Johannes Rau, president of Germany from 1999 to 2004, and blamed him for the misuse of his political privileges during his term as prime minister of the German Federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia (Steinkühler & van Zütphen, 2000). Rau was accused of using overpriced private jets at the expense of the Westdeutsche Landesbank (WestLB) for private purposes. Although overwhelming evidence of president Rau’s misuse of power existed, an inquiry commission closed the case in May 2000.

This is one example in a long list of cases in which the misconduct of politicians became the focus of media reports and developed into a “political scandal.” Generally spoken, the term scandal “refers to actions or events involving certain kinds of transgression which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response” (Thompson, 2000, p. 13). Most importantly, for a scandal to arise, the transgression does not necessarily need to reflect a legal offense. Transgressions can also reflect the violation of moral values or social norms. Thus, what is perceived as a transgression is strongly linked to cultural and social-historical contexts as well as to the validity of norms and values of a social group or society. This leads to another point of definition: A scandal is always a public affair. In other words, a scandal needs to be communicated and known to the public. Accordingly, the main function of media communication in many scandals is to make the scandal visible. Within political science, there are distinctions between public scandals in general and political scandals (e.g., Markovits & Silverstein, 1988). The core difference refers to the actor who causes the transgression. If the individual at the center of the scandal is recognized as a political actor, it makes the scandal a political scandal (Thompson, 2000).

Thompson (2000) distinguishes between three basic types of scandal in the political field: sex scandals, power scandals, and financial scandals. Whereas each type includes a transgression of norms or conventions, the kind of violated norm varies. For sex scandals, the transgression of norms governing sexual relations is central. This includes criminal sex offences, sex with minors, but also social taboos such as homosexuality or prostitution. Especially in the field of sex scandals, it is often the second order transgression that makes the scandal important. For a second order transgression, Thompson (2000) describes denials and counter allegations from the transgressor, which are often experienced as even more outrageous by the public than the initial transgression. Financial scandals violate norms governing the acquisition and allocation of economic resources such as illegal transactions or the use of financial resources by

politicians. The latter can be further differentiated into several types of scandals due to corruption, bribery, misuse of public funds, or the insufficient separation of private financial interests and political duties. Power scandals reflect violations of the rules and procedures that regulate competition for and the exercising of political power. These scandals can also include illegitimate financial transactions, but the financial transgression here is only of secondary importance.

In contrast to the existence of several implicit assumptions about the cause and impact of political scandals, we lack empirical information about how people perceive and evaluate these incidents. What are the underlying emotional and cognitive reactions to moral transgressions by politicians? Are there interindividual differences in lay person's emotional reactions to political scandals? How do people differ in their desire for retribution? Regarding these questions, limitations of political theories are reached, and psychological theories about reactions to norm violations come into place.

### **Emotional Reactions toward a Norm Violation**

According to Haidt (2003), moral emotions differ from basic emotions in that they are not linked only to the welfare of the individual, but also to the welfare and interests of others and society in general. Moral emotions are key elements in the regulation of moral behavior (Bandura, 1991, 2001) and in communicating moral judgments and evaluations to others (Ben-Ze'ev, 1997; Eisenberg, 2000). Haidt (2003) mentions four subtypes of moral emotions: 1) emotions concerning others, i.e., contempt, anger, displeasure, 2) self-conscious emotions, i.e., shame, embarrassment, guilt, 3) emotions related to the suffering of others, i.e., empathy, and 4) emotions related to praising others, i.e., gratitude, fear, elevation. In the present study, we focus on self- and other-focused emotional reactions to norm violations.

Other-focused emotions (e.g., anger and moral outrage) are typically triggered when individuals hold another person responsible for a transgression (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In terms of evolutionary theories, the function of other-focused emotions can primarily be seen in preventing others from transgressions and, thus, warranting the maintenance of the moral system (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Negative other-focused emotions can motivate aggression and retaliation against the transgressor (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), for example, by means of punishment (Allred, 1999; Nisbet & Cohen, 1996; Weiner, 1985). Addressing negative other-oriented emotions in response to scandals, Jiang and colleagues

(2011) found that a scandal evokes public outrage, especially when it is widely publicized and involves an individual who is perceived to be a cultural representative.

Whereas the idea about other-focused emotions as a reaction to norm violations is widely spread, the role of self-conscious emotions is almost neglected. Negative self-conscious emotions (e.g., shame, guilt, and embarrassment) occur when individuals evaluate themselves negatively or when they feel negatively judged (Fischer & Tangney, 1995; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). They typically result from internal attributions of responsibility for transgressions (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Because the self is, in part, defined by group memberships, the behavior of an ingroup member can also affect self-evaluations. This link between shared identity and group-based negative self-oriented emotions has been shown in correlational and experimental studies (Iyer, Schmader, & Lickel, 2006; Schmader & Lickel 2006).

Based on these considerations, Marker's (2007) definition of a political scandal as a publicly waged, dynamic developing conflict about the reputation of political actors following an accused transgression which cause general outrage seems insufficient with regard to two aspects. First, outrage might not be the only emotional reaction that results. In fact, negative self-oriented emotions (such as shame, guilt, and embarrassment) might also be triggered by a political scandal. Second, this definition does not include any information about the cognitive evaluations of the transgressor. In our study, we focus in particular on two specific cognitive reactions: perceived value threat and decline of political trust.

### **Political Scandals, Justice Notions, and Value Threat**

When norms are violated, people who subscribe to these norms typically experience two forms of threat: a status threat and a value threat (Vidmar, 2000; Wenzel, Okimoto, Feather, & Platow, 2008). A status threat results when transgressors put themselves above others and assume a position of superiority by means of breaking a rule that others obey. As a response to disempowerment, people who perceive themselves as the victim of a transgressor's degradation experience a need for retribution. Vidmar and Miller (1980) argue that punishments can serve this need by degrading the transgressor and reducing the transgressor's status and power. Therefore, people commonly demand that the offender should be punished because the punishment disempowers the offender and helps to restore the relative status and power of the victim (Wenzel et al., 2008).

A value threat results because we expect that common values are respected by all members in a social community. Transgressions express disrespect for these norms and values (Miller, 2001) and threaten their validity in the group. Accordingly, norm violations elicit not only a need for retribution but also a need for restoration. The need for restoration reflects the desire to restore the validity of common values and norms. Violated norms and rules can be re-validated through social consensus and reaffirmation (Boeckmann & Tyler, 1997; Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997). This consensus reflects the feeling of effectively defending social norms for the victim and supporters as well as a realization of one's own wrongdoing and remorse by the transgressor (Durkheim, 1964). The transgression of an elected politician who serves as a representative and social model can be seen as a signal of value erosion within the community and nation. When people experience the value threat of a political leader, they should develop a strong requirement for measures to re-endorse those values.

Turner (1991) suggests that a need for restorative justice presumes a sense of shared identity. In line with this reasoning, Wenzel and colleagues (2008) argue that the perception of a shared social identity with a transgressor should increase the need for restorative justice. In contrast to this, perceiving a non-shared identity with a transgressor should enhance the need for retributive justice. Predicting different needs for punishment depending on social identity, Wenzel and Thielmann (2006) conducted two studies about tax evaders and social security fraud in Australia. As predicted, they found a positive main effect of identification with Australia on the demand for alternative punishments (e.g., community service), but not on the demand for traditional punishments (e.g., prison sentences). How can we transfer these findings to the context of political scandals? The sharedness of social identity between a politician who violates a social norm and a public perceiver should predict justice notions of the public perceivers as follows: Increased sharedness of social identity should increase value threat and the need for restorative justice and decrease the need for retributive justice. But what affects the sharedness of social identity between a political person and a civilian? One possibility is the sharedness of the political orientation. To be members or supporters of the same political party should increase the sharedness of social identity. With regard to Wenzel and Thielmann (2006), nationality or regional ties can also increase the sharedness of social identity.

A potential dispositional moderator of laypersons' reactions to politicians' norm violations is justice sensitivity. Justice sensitivity is a personality disposition that reflects people's readiness to perceive and react to violations of justice norms (Schmitt, Baumert, Gollwitzer, & Maes, 2010). Because norm violation can be experienced from different social

perspectives (Mikula, 1980), justice sensitivity has been differentiated into victim sensitivity, perpetrator sensitivity, beneficiary sensitivity, and observer sensitivity (Schmitt et al., 2010). The present study focuses on two perspectives as moderators of reactions to political norm violations, namely, observer sensitivity and victim sensitivity. Previous studies indicate that observer sensitivity is related to prosocial personality traits. People who are sensitive to justice from an observer perspective more easily interpret ambiguous situations as unjust (Baumert & Schmitt, 2009) and experience moral outrage more often compared to people low on observer sensitivity. On the other hand, victim sensitivity is related to antisocial traits and self-oriented dispositions. Persons high on victim sensitivity are chronically sensitive to being exploited by others (Gollwitzer & Rothmund, 2009; Gollwitzer, Rothmund, Pfeiffer, & Ensenbach, 2009) and less willing to take risks in order to intervene against a norm violation (Niesta-Kayser, Greitemeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2010). Accordingly, it can be argued that other-focused negative moral emotions, value threat, and the need for restorative justice should be triggered more easily in people high on observer sensitivity but not for people high on victim sensitivity.

### **Impact of Scandals on Political Trust**

Public opinion polls within Western democracies report decreasing trust in government and political institutions and a deterioration of party images and party identification (Dalton, 2004, 2006; Putnam, Pharr, & Dalton, 2000). This decline in political trust is considered to be a threat to the functioning of a democratic political system (Putnam, 1993). Accordingly, empirical research has started to address the reasons for this development.

Some studies suggest that political scandals promote the decline of political trust (Bowler & Karp, 2004; Maier, 2011; Schwarz & Bless, 1992). However, results are partly inconsistent. Bowler and Karp (2004) found evidence for a negative effect of political scandals on trust in politicians in general as well as on trust in legislative institutions. One explanation of these results is that the occurrence of political scandals decreases confidence in the effectiveness of the legal and political system to prevent transgressions. In other words, political scandals undermine support for the political system because citizens gain the impression that the system provides an opportunity to violate norms and values. Maier (2011) reported negative effects of a real political scandal in Bavaria on the evaluation of the transgressing politician as well as on the evaluation of other politicians who were not involved in the scandal. He further found negative effects on sympathy ratings of almost all

political parties - irrespective of their connection to the scandal. Different results were reported by Maier (2002). He showed that the extent to which television covered political scandals had a positive effect on the evaluation of the political elite as a whole and on satisfaction with democracy. Maier (2002) explained this finding as follows: A successful punishment through political institutions and its representatives can be experienced as strengthening the social consensus and can therefore lead to positive evaluations of the institutions and the legal system.

In our study, we address the hypothesis that information about a political scandal can threaten political trust immediately after it is perceived. Beyond this, we argue that trait political trust should moderate how persons react when a concrete transgression occurs. A threat to political trust in reaction to a norm violation should be higher for people with low political trust compared to people with high political trust. On the one hand, people are more willing to process information in a manner consistent with their general attitudes (Festinger, 1957) and, on the other hand, high political trust works as a protective factor for singular negative trust experiences. Moreover, Earle and Cvetkovich (1995) suggest that similarity between the truster and trustee influences trust: "People tend to trust others who are similar to them and to distrust those who are dissimilar from them" (p. 17). Similarities serve as a source of information, particularly when no further information exists (Friedrich, 2004). Seeing a shared social identity as one form of similarity, it can be assumed that people who share a social identity with a politician will show higher confidence, and therefore, there should be less of a threat to their trust when this politician violates shared norms.

### **The Present Study**

The research questions of the present study are threefold. First, we argue that a perceived norm violation by a politician poses a moral threat and triggers moral emotions. More precisely, we test the assumption that emotional reactions (self- and other-focused moral emotions) and moral threats (a value threat and a threat to political trust) are elicited by the perception of a norm violation. Second, we test situational and differential moderators of these reactions. Based on work by Wenzel et al. (2008), we argue that a perceived value threat, self-focused moral emotions, and the need for restorative action are higher when the recipient and the politician share a common social identity, whereas other-focused moral emotions and the need for retributive action are higher when there is no shared social identity. We further predict a lower trust threat when the recipient and politician share a social identity



(Earle & Cvetkovich, 1995). Next to social identity as a situational moderator, we also investigate justice sensitivity and political trust as personality moderators of cognitive and emotional reactions to a politician's norm violation. As previous studies indicate, people high on justice sensitivity show stronger emotional reactions to perceived injustice (Schmitt et al., 2010). Moreover, justice sensitivity from an observer perspective (JSO) and justice sensitivity from a victim perspective (JSV) differ systematically in how these dispositions are related to unjust or immoral behavior. It can be argued that a value threat and other-focused negative moral emotions should be triggered more easily for people high on JSO but not for people high on JSV. We also argue that political threat in reaction to a norm violation is higher for people with low political trust compared to people with high political trust. The third aim in this study is to investigate how cognitive and emotional reactions to norm violations are related to people's need for retaliation. Based on work by Wenzel et al., (2008), we argue that a perceived value threat should promote people's need for restorative justice but not people's need for retributive justice.

## **Method**

### **Sample and Design**

The study was conducted as an online experiment with a 2 (transgression by a politician: yes v. no) x 2 (shared social identity of politician and recipient: high vs. low) design. Participants were recruited via web forums, mailing lists, and web sites of regional newspapers in different areas of Germany. Five hundred and forty participants completed the online experiment. Eighty two participants were excluded from the analyses. Ten participants indicated that they had done investigations on the bogus newspaper article while they were doing the online experiment, eight participants stated that they had not made honest statements in the experiment, and 64 participants indicated that they had lived less than ten years in the federal state in which they were born.

The age of the participants ranged from 14 to 69 years. Women (60.6%) and student participants (82.2%) were overrepresented. As Table 1 indicates, participants were successfully recruited from all federal states in Germany. However, participants who were born in Rhineland-Palatinate were overrepresented (18.6%), which can be explained by the fact that the study was conducted at the University of Koblenz-Landau in Rhineland-Palatinate.

*Table 1.* Frequency and percentage of the birth federal state.

	<i>N</i>	percentage (%)
Rhineland-Palatinate	85	18.6
Baden-Wuerttemberg	59	12.9
Lower Saxony	54	11.8
North Rhine-Westphalia	34	7.4
Berlin	31	6.8
Schleswig-Holstein	29	6.3
Saxony	25	5.5
Hesse	23	5.0
Bavaria	20	4.4
Saarland	19	4.1
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania	18	3.9
Brandenburg	15	3.3
Saxony-Anhalt	13	2.8
Thuringia	12	2.6
Hamburg	10	2.2
Bremen	7	1.5
Not in Germany	4	0.9
	458	100

## Procedure

The experiment was introduced to the participants as a study on how people evaluate the behavior of politicians. First, demographic variables (age, sex, occupation, level of education, state of residence within Germany) and political attitudes were assessed. Then, depending on the experimental condition, one of four bogus newspaper articles reporting the behavior of a fictitious German politician was presented. Participants were instructed to read the respective article carefully. Then, emotional (self-oriented and other-oriented moral emotions) and cognitive reactions (perceived value threat and perceived threat to political trust) were assessed. Moreover, in the norm violation conditions, retributive and restorative forms of restoring justice were measured. At the end of the experiment, justice sensitivity and political

trust indicating relatively stable personality dispositions were measured, a manipulation check was conducted, control questions were assessed, and all participants were fully debriefed.

### **Bogus Newspaper Reports**

**Transgression manipulation.** In the transgression condition, the newspaper article reported on a politician's abuse of political power and financial benefits. The politician had submitted false claims concerning private flights and was now accused of fraud. In the no transgression control condition, the newspaper article reported on a politician's holiday destination during summer break in the parliament.

**Social identity manipulation.** Shared social identity between the politician and the participant of the study was manipulated by a variation of the federal state within Germany in which the politician was living and working. In the ingroup condition, participants read a newspaper article in which the politician was living and working in the same federal state in which the participant had been born. To increase the salience of a shared identity, the surname of the politician was additionally varied so that it was typical of the respective federal state (e.g., Kunz for Rhineland Palatinate). In the outgroup condition, the participants read a newspaper article in which the politician was living and working in a randomly chosen other federal state. Again, the surname of the politician was typical of the respective federal state

### **Measures**

**Political attitudes.** First, political interest was assessed with a one-item measure ("How much are you generally interested in politics and political issues?"). Second, the strength of identification with different political institutions (Europe, Germany, federal county in which the person was born) was measured (e.g. "How much do you feel you are a citizen of your birth federal state or obligated to your birth federal state?"). These and all the following items were answered on 6-point rating scales ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*absolutely*) if not otherwise mentioned.

**Emotional reactions.** Other-oriented moral emotions (e.g., "The politician's behavior is outrageous," two items,  $\alpha = .95$ ) as well as self-oriented moral emotions (e.g., "I feel ashamed about the politician's behavior," two items,  $\alpha = .77$ ) were assessed. Furthermore, empathy-related emotions were measured (e.g., "I can easily put myself into the politician's position," two items,  $\alpha = .82$ ).

**Perceived value threat.** A four-item scale was used to measure perceived value threat (e.g., “Such a politician threatens the rules and norms that should apply to our society,”  $\alpha = .92$ ). The scale was adapted from Keller and Gollwitzer (unpublished).

**Perceived threat to political trust.** Perceived threat to political trust was assessed using a two-item scale (e.g., “This kind of news undermines my trust in the political system,” “This kind of news undermines my trust in politicians,”  $\alpha = .94$ ).

**Justice notions.** In the norm violation condition, retributive justice notions (e.g., “The politician deserves to be penalized,” three items,  $\alpha = .81$ ) and restorative justice notions (e.g., “It is important to me that the politician realizes that his behavior was wrong,” three items,  $\alpha = .64$ ) were assessed independently.

**Justice sensitivity.** Four items from the justice sensitivity scale (Schmitt et al., 2010) were included in the study. Two of the items measured justice sensitivity from a victim perspective (e.g., “It bothers me when others get something that ought to be mine,”  $\alpha = .84$ ), and two items measured justice sensitivity from the observer perspective (“I am upset when someone is undeservingly worse off than others,”  $\alpha = .77$ ).

**Political trust.** Political trust was assessed with a four-item measure reflecting the evaluation of the politicians’ ability, integrity, and benevolence as well as confidence in the political system (e.g. “I think that in general, politicians want the best for the people,” “In general, I trust the German democratic system,”  $\alpha = .80$ ).

**Manipulation check.** Convergent validity of the norm violation manipulation was measured with two items, assessing participants’ moral evaluation of the politician’s behavior in the newspaper article (e.g. “I think the politician’s behavior is legitimate,”  $\alpha = .95$ ). Moreover, three items were included to check the divergent validity of the norm violation manipulation with regard to the perceived credibility (“The newspaper article was credible”), perceived informativeness (“The newspaper article was informative”), and objectivity (“The newspaper article was objective”) of the newspaper article. In order to check the manipulation of shared social identity between the participant and the politician in the newspaper article, all participants were asked to recall the federal state in which the politician was living and working (“In which federal state did the politician from the article live and work?”).

**Control items.** Participants were asked whether they had answered all questions seriously and honestly and whether they had done investigations on the bogus newspaper article while

they were the doing the online experiment. The given answers were dichotomous (*yes/no*). Finally, they were asked what they thought the study was about.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

As predicted, participants in the transgression conditions evaluated the politician's behavior as more negative ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ) than participants in the no transgression conditions ( $M = 0.73$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ),  $F(1, 453) = 2661.06$ ,  $p < .001$ . Credibility was rated equally high for the news reports in both conditions,  $F(1, 453) = 2.70$ ,  $p = .10$ , but participants in the no transgression conditions perceived the report to be less objective,  $F(1, 453) = 21.14$ ,  $p < .001$ , and less informative,  $F(1, 453) = 85.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , compared to participants in the norm violation condition. In conclusion, the manipulation checks fully supported the convergent validity but only partially supported the discriminant validity of the manipulation of norm violation.

Eighty one percent of the participants correctly remembered the federal state in which the politician in the newspaper report lived and worked. Moreover, the strength of identification with the federal county in which participants were born ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) was as high as the strength of identification with Germany ( $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ),  $t(456) = 1.90$ ,  $p = .058$ , and higher than the strength of identification with Europe ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ),  $t(455) = 7.29$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, we assume that the manipulation of the shared social identity was successful. Interestingly, memory performance was better in the ingroup condition (84.8%) than in the outgroup condition (77.4%),  $\chi^2 (df = 1; N = 456) = 4.02$ ;  $p = .045$ .<sup>1</sup>

### Cognitive and emotional reactions to perceived norm violations

In order to test participants' reactions to the experimental manipulation, we conducted a 2 (transgression by a politician: *yes vs. no*) x 2 (shared social identity of politician and recipient: *high vs. low*) MANOVA with self-oriented moral emotions, other-oriented moral emotions, perceived value threat, and perceived threat to political trust as dependent variables. As expected, we found a main effect of norm violation on all dependent variables. In the transgression condition, participants reported stronger self-oriented moral emotions,  $F(1, 453)$

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<sup>1</sup> According to Mackie and Worth (1989) participants performing a memory task recalled more information about in-group members than about out-group members. This will be discussed later in the discussion section.

= 257.46,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .36$ , stronger other-oriented moral emotions,  $F(1, 453) = 890.46$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .66$ , higher perceived value threat,  $F(1, 453) = 1084.19$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .71$ , and higher perceived threat to political trust,  $F(1, 453) = 909.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .50$ , than in the control condition. Table 2 (see Appendix) provides the means and standard deviations for all variables. However, there were no main effects of shared social identity or an interaction effect of transgression and shared social identity on any of the dependent variables (all  $ps > .20$ ).<sup>2</sup> The latter finding largely contradicts the assumption that shared identity between recipient and politician moderates recipients' cognitive and emotional reactions toward the norm violation.

### Dispositional Moderators

**Justice sensitivity.** We calculated separate moderated regression analyses with justice sensitivity from the observer perspective and from the victim perspective as moderators. For both perspectives, we independently tested the assumption that cognitive and emotional reactions to the politician's transgression would vary depending on justice sensitivity.

First, we calculated independent moderated regression analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken 2003) with the transgression factor, justice sensitivity from an observer perspective (JSO), and the interaction term as predictors and the four dependent variables as criteria. JSO was standardized before the interaction term was calculated (Aiken & West, 1991). These analyses indicated that JSO moderated the effect of the transgression manipulation on perceived value threat,  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .006$ , perceived threat to political trust,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .009$ , and other-oriented moral emotions,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .007$ . JSO did not moderate the effect of norm violation on self-oriented moral emotions, ( $p > .05$ ). In the transgression condition, people high on JSO reported a higher value threat,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $p = .003$ , a higher threat to political trust,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $p = .002$ , and stronger other-oriented moral emotions,  $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ , than people low on JSO. By contrast, in the control condition, JSO did not correlate with any of these four variables, (all  $ps > .28$ ). This finding supports our prediction that people high on justice sensitivity from an observer perspective indicate stronger emotional and cognitive reactions to a politician's norm violation than people low on justice sensitivity from an observer perspective.

In our second set of moderated regression analyses, we entered the transgression factor, justice sensitivity from a victim perspective (JSV), and the interaction term as

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<sup>2</sup> The same pattern of results could be found in a three-way-interaction analysis when we controlled for identification strength with Germany as a higher-order social group.

predictors and, again, the four dependent variables as criteria. JSV was standardized before the interaction term was calculated (Aiken & West, 1991). These analyses revealed different results than the analyses with JSO as a moderator: JSV did not moderate the effect of norm violation on emotional or cognitive reactions (all  $ps > .05$ ). Instead, we found a main effect of JSV on perceived value threat. Independent of the article that they had read, people high on JSV reported a higher value threat than people low on victim sensitivity,  $\beta = .08$ ,  $p = .041$ . This finding supports our prediction that people high on justice sensitivity from a victim perspective do not indicate stronger emotional and cognitive reactions to a politician's norm violation than people low on justice sensitivity from a victim perspective.

**Political trust.** We calculated separate moderated regression analyses (Cohen et al., 2003) with the transgression factor, political trust (PT), and the interaction term as predictors of the four dependent variables as criteria. PT was standardized before the interaction term was calculated (Aiken & West, 1991). As expected, PT did not moderate the effect of the transgression manipulation on value threat and on the emotional reactions, (all  $ps > .60$ ). However, the analyses revealed a main effect of PT on threat to political trust,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .04$ , indicating that PT was a significant predictor of threat to political trust in the no transgression condition,  $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p = .002$ , and a PT x transgression interaction effect,  $\beta = -.11$ ,  $p = .016$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .006$ , indicating that the effect of PT in the transgression condition,  $\beta = -.35$ ,  $p < .001$ , increased compared to the no transgression condition.

### **Justice Notions**

We calculated separate multiple regression analyses in order to explore how cognitive and emotional reactions were related to participants' need for restorative and retributive justice. Group comparisons with transgression as a factor were not possible because justice notions had been measured only within the transgression conditions. We further did not include shared social identity because the results of our previous MANOVA had not shown any interaction effects on emotions, value threat, or threat to political trust.

Overall, participants had a stronger preference for restorative actions ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) compared to retributive actions ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $t(254) = -8.60$ ,  $p < .001$ , in response to the politician's transgression. In the first regression analysis, we entered value threat, threat to political trust, other-oriented moral emotions, and self-oriented moral emotions as predictors and retributive justice as the criterion. All variables were standardized before they were entered into the regression model (Aiken & West, 1991). The full regression

model explained 32% of the variance, and the results indicated that all four variables explained independent portions of variance. Value threat,  $\beta = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ , threat to political trust,  $\beta = .15$ ,  $p = .022$ , and other-oriented moral emotions,  $\beta = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ , promoted participants' need for retributive action. Interestingly, we found the opposite effect for self-oriented moral emotions,  $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p = .043$ . In a second regression model, we entered value threat, threat to political trust, other-oriented moral emotions, and self-oriented moral emotions as predictors and restorative justice as the criterion. Again, all variables were standardized before they were entered into the regression model (Aiken & West, 1991). The full regression model explained 27% of the variance. Other-oriented moral emotions,  $\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ , promoted participants' need for restorative action. In this model, value threat,  $\beta = .13$ ,  $p = .10$ , self-focused moral emotions,  $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .54$ , and threat to political trust,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $p = .06$ , had no significant independent effect.

## Discussion

The aims of the present study were threefold. First, we investigated how laypersons react to a politician's transgression. More specifically, we presented a newspaper article about a politician's abuse of political power and financial benefits (transgression condition) and assessed recipients' emotional (self- and other-oriented moral emotions) and cognitive (perceived value threat and threat to political trust) reactions compared to participants who read about a politician's holiday destination during summer break (no transgression condition). As expected, we found that participants reported stronger negative self- and other-oriented moral emotions, an increased value threat, and an increased threat to political trust in the transgression condition compared to the no transgression condition. This finding confirms our assumptions that a political scandal can trigger not only moral outrage as proposed by Marker (2007), but a range of diverse psychological reactions, including emotional and cognitive reactions.

Second, we tested the influence of situational and differential moderators on these emotional and cognitive reactions. We investigated whether social identity, as a situational moderator, would moderate the effect of a perceived transgression on cognitive and emotional reactions. Based on work by Wenzel et al. (2008), we argued that the sharedness of social identity between a political transgressor and the recipient should increase self-oriented moral emotions, value threat, and threat to political trust. However, we did not find any interaction effects of the transgression manipulation and social identity on emotional or cognitive



reactions. Moreover, we predicted that justice sensitivity would be a dispositional moderator of emotional and cognitive reactions to a politician's norm violation. As expected, the results of our study indicate that justice sensitivity from an observer perspective and justice sensitivity from a victim's perspective differ systematically in how they are related to the dependent variables. In the transgression condition, people high on observer sensitivity reported stronger other-focused moral emotions, a higher value threat, and a higher trust threat than people low on observer sensitivity. This finding is in line with studies indicating that people high on justice sensitivity from an observer perspective more easily interpret ambiguous situations as unjust (Baumert & Schmitt, 2009), get more easily outraged when they encounter injustice, and have generally higher moral standards (Schmitt et al., 2010) compared to people low on observer sensitivity. To the contrary, victim sensitivity did not moderate the effect of the perceived transgression on emotional or cognitive reactions. Instead, we found a main effect of victim sensitivity on perceived value threat. Independent of the experimental condition, people high on justice sensitivity from a victim perspective reported a higher value threat than people low on victim sensitivity. This result can be interpreted in line with other findings showing that people high on victim sensitivity are generally more suspicious of others' mean intentions (Gollwitzer & Rothmund, 2009; Gollwitzer et al., 2009) than people low on victim sensitivity. Both results support previous interpretations that people high on victim sensitivity are primarily concerned about self-protection and justice for the self, whereas people high on observer sensitivity are concerned about others and justice as a moral principle (Schmitt et al., 2010). We also investigated whether political trust as a dispositional variable moderates the threat of political trust as a reaction to a norm violation by a politician. Indeed, persons with low political trust reported a stronger threat to political trust in the transgression condition. Two explanations for this finding can be distinguished. First, high levels of political trust might lead to complacency (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). This interpretation is based on the idea that there is no need for individuals to become distressed when a single politician behaves in an untrustworthy manner as long as politicians in general can be trusted. However, this theoretical account cannot explain why political trust does not moderate other cognitive and emotional reactions to the transgression. In other words, if somebody reacts indifferently to a politician's norm violation, this should include a reduced emotional reaction. However, political trust did not moderate the effect of the transgression condition on other-oriented or self-oriented emotional reactions. This leads us to a second explanation, which is based on Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1957). Consistency principles play a fundamental role at various levels

of social information processing. Jonas, Graupmann, Fischer, Greitemeyer, and Frey (2003) found that party voters showed a stronger preference for consonant than dissonant information and evaluated the former as more important and interesting than the latter when confronted with a scandal of their preferred party. In reference to political trust, consistency effects could lead people to process information in ways that allow them to preserve the level of political trust that they have. This might also include selective information processes (Frey, 1986) that affect the search and evaluation of information depending on the general level of political trust.

The third aim of our study was to investigate how cognitive and emotional reactions to norm violations promote individuals' needs for retribution and restoration. The acceptance of restorative actions was generally higher than the acceptance of retributive action. This result is consistent with previous criminological research indicating that participants generally prefer restorative provisions over retributive provisions (Strang, 2002). Based on work by Wenzel et al. (2008), we predicted that perceived value threat and self-focused moral emotions would promote a person's need for restorative justice but not the need for retributive justice. In other words, shame about an ingroup member's behavior and a feeling of threatened shared values should lead to actions that restore a value consensus. Conversely, retributive justice notions should be triggered by other-focused moral emotions such as anger and outrage (Allred, 1999; Nisbet & Cohen, 1996; Weiner, 1985). However, regarding both justice notions, we found results that differed from what we expected. Other-oriented moral emotions predicted both the need for restoration and the need for retribution, whereas self-oriented moral emotions did not predict the need for restoration and negatively predicted the need for retribution. Value threat and threat to political trust predicted neither the need for restoration nor the need for retribution. To explain differences between our results and the results of Wenzel and colleagues (2008), we need to take a closer look at the differences in the study designs. Wenzel et al. (2008) examined justice reactions from a victim perspective, whereas we used a scenario in which participants evaluated the norm violation from a relatively neutral observer perspective. It can be assumed that a shared identity between victim and offender has a different effect on the need for restoration than a shared identity between victim and observer. Keller and Gollwitzer (unpublished) examined whether value threat predicts punitive responses above and beyond transgression seriousness when the transgression was perceived from an observer perspective. In three studies, they found that value threat predicted support for retributive sanctions but not for restorative sanctions. These studies included a broad range of norm violations such as vandalism, bodily assault, cheating,

cruelty toward animals, and blasphemy. The perceived seriousness of a transgression and value threat were highly correlated, but both explained a unique part in punishment severity. They furthermore found that retributive sanctions were evaluated more positively when the value threat was high because retributive sanctions are perceived as more effective in restoring justice. In fact, the (psychological) exclusion of the offender from the community is a fairly common reaction after an offender's value threat (Vidmar, 2002; Marques & Paez, 1994). According to Turner (1991), uncertainty and value threat are reduced if offenders are no longer regarded as members of the community. In summary, more research is needed to clarify the relation between a value threat, negative moral emotions, and justice notions, and further moderator variables such as the social perspective of the recipient should be taken into account. Furthermore, realistic examples of retributive and restorative justice notions that are comparable to former studies on retaliation must be developed in the context of political norm violations.

### **Limitations**

Finally, we want to discuss some limitations of our study, including uncertainty regarding the validity of the experimental manipulations, potential sequence effects in the assessment of dispositional variables, and the use of ad hoc measures. Our manipulation check indicated that participants in the no transgression condition perceived the bogus newspaper article as less objective and less informative than participants in the transgression condition. To ensure that effects are due to the reported transgression and not due to other features of the news reports, the material needs to be improved in future studies.

Another critique that should be discussed is our manipulation of social identity by means of the fit between the federal state in which the transgression was enacted and the federal state in which the participant was born. First, one might call into question the assumption that participants would identify at all with the federal state in which they were born. Our results indicate that they do. Participants' strength of identification with the federal county in which they were born was equally as high as their identification with Germany and higher than their identification with Europe. Second, another potential objection to our manipulation is that it was too weak to create variability in the perceived sharedness of social identity between groups. Although 81% of the participants remembered the given information correctly, we cannot be sure about the fact that participants really experienced a higher shared group identification in the ingroup condition compared to the outgroup condition because we did not measure it directly. The validity of our manipulation is supported by the finding that

participants in the ingroup condition remembered the federal state of the politician in the news article more often compared to participants in the outgroup condition. Deeper information processing might be one explanation for differences in participants' abilities to remember information about the county that was referred to in the article. This interpretation is in line with previous research indicating that participants are able to recall more information about ingroup members than about outgroup members (Mackie & Worth, 1989). More specifically, Reese, Steffens, and Jonas (under review) argue that information about an ingroup deviant should instigate a deeper and more systematic information processing mode than information about an outgroup deviant because the former is generally of higher relevance than the latter (Marques & Paez, 1994; Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001). However, we need better manipulation checks in order to test the effectiveness of the manipulation in future studies.

As the study was conducted as an online experiment, we had to deal with a single point of measurement. To avoid carry-over effects from personality trait questionnaires (justice sensitivity and political trust) to our dependent variables and to reduce priming effects, these scales were assessed at the end of the experiment. Although these scales measure stable and consistent parts of personal perception, experience, and attitudes, these answers are vulnerable to the influence of situational events and contexts. Thus, we cannot fully preclude that moderation effects of these variables are partly the result of participants' conscious or unconscious intentions to provide consistent pictures of themselves. However, our results showed no group differences in justice sensitivity or political trust between the transgression condition and the no transgression condition.

A further shortcoming of our study is the use of insufficiently pre-tested questionnaires assessing political trust. Although trust has previously been assessed in political science (e.g., Boeckmann & Tyler, 2002; Bowler & Karp, 2004; Maier, 2011), we did not encounter a theoretically sound and empirically valid measurement of political trust. Thus, we constructed a new short scale of political trust that was theoretically based on the model of trust (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), which differentiates three objects of perceived trustworthiness: ability, integrity, and benevolence and institutional theories (Mishler & Rose, 2001), which focus on trust in a political system. Although these items showed an appropriate internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) and factor structure, they are not able to replace the development a specific questionnaire for political trust for future investigations.

On a more general level, this study can be understood as the starting point of a research avenue addressing the psychological underpinnings of laypersons' reactions to political scandals. We focused especially on the moral relevance of politicians' transgressions and recipients' cognitive and emotional reactions to these. On a theoretical level, we want to transfer and apply theoretical insights and empirical paradigms from moral psychology and justice research to the realm of political psychology. Our empirical approach includes both situational and dispositional moderators of these psychological reactions and is aimed at developing process models of psychological reactions to political scandals.

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## Appendix

*Table 2.* Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 IS_FS	1.00												
2 IS_G	.55***	1.00											
3 IS_E	.17***	.28***	1.00										
4 PI	.08	.17***	.28***	1.00									
5 ER_O	.03	.08	-.08	-.12*	1.00								
6 ER_S	.03	.04	.00	-.07	.74***	1.00							
7 VT	.02	.07	-.10*	-.11*	.90***	.73***	1.00						
8 TPT	-.02	.02	-.19***	-.19***	.81***	.65***	.83***	1.00					
9 JN_Ret	-.15*	-.10	-.21**	-.11	.50***	.18**	.49***	.40***	1.00				
10 JN_Res	.05	.17**	-.04	-.09	.49***	.28***	.43***	.36***	.33***	1.00			
11 JS_V	.10*	.08	-.09	-.14**	.09	.06	.10*	.12*	.14*	.21**	1.00		
12 JS_O	.04	-.05	-.01	-.05	.07	.06	.03	.06	.09	.30***	.41***	1.00	
13 PT	.16***	.26***	.25***	.04	.01	.02	.01	-.12**	-.24***	.06	-.10*	-.04	1.00
<i>Mean</i>	3.42	3.31	2.81	3.50	2.04	1.31	1.97	2.07	3.43	4.12	2.62	3.08	2.39
<i>SD</i>	1.42	1.25	1.32	1.34	1.89	1.45	1.65	1.91	1.26	0.92	1.36	1.19	1.02

*Note.* IS\_FS = Identification with birth federal state; IS\_G = Identification with Germany; IS\_E = Identification with Europe; PI = Political interests; ER\_O = Emotional reaction other-focused; ER\_S = Emotional reaction self-conscious; VT = Value threat; TPT = Threat to political trust; JN\_Ret = Justice notion for retribution; JN\_Res = Justice notion for restoration; JS\_O = Justice Sensitivity Observer perspective; JS\_V = Justice Sensitivity Victim perspective; PT = Political trust; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

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