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# The Poor Judge Others More Harshly



By [Stefan Thau](#) , INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

**Inequality makes people morally judgmental because they feel more vulnerable to the wrongdoing of others.**

As income gaps continue to widen around the world, with a growing share of wealth concentrated in the hands of the top one percent, there is mounting discontent among those with less. Faced with reduced job prospects, less healthy lives and a shrinking share of global income, those at the lower end of the socioeconomic strata are also feeling vulnerable to the wrongdoing of others.

My recent [study](#) – co-written with Marko Pitesa (of Grenoble École de Management) – in *Psychological Science* suggests that the lack of material resources determines how morally judgmental we are. It seems that the less income (such as salary and other assets) we have to fall back on, the less able we feel to cope with the effects of others' harmful behaviour.

We started out by looking at data taken from the World Values Survey - which evaluates values and beliefs from around the globe – over 13 years and pertaining to 56 countries. Respondents were asked to quantify the

intensity of their objections to eight harmful behaviours (e.g., “lying,” “cheating on taxes”). Comparing these answers against income data for the respondents, we noticed a direct correlation between economic hardship – measured in terms of both income and inflation level – and tough moral judgments.

We next launched an experiment designed to paint a clearer picture of the money-morality link. First, participants were asked to choose their monthly income from options manipulated to produce perceptions that participants either lacked or had plenty of income. With those feelings implanted and confirmed via questionnaire, they were then asked to read scenarios describing either bad but victimless behaviour (e.g., making out in public) or harmful moral lapses (e.g., physical assault). We asked them to rate how acceptable they found the behaviour in each scenario.

For only the harmful actions, the participants with an induced sense of lacking income expressed harsher judgments on the whole than those with feelings of financial abundance. For the victimless crimes, there was no significant difference between the two groups’ responses.

The research sheds light on a process having more to do with protection needs than dollars and cents. Feelings of financial insecurity (i.e., not having enough) lead to an increased general sense of vulnerability to the effects of others’ harmful behaviour. This in turn gives rise to a heightened sensitivity to the potential outcomes of harmful transgressions, and by extension harsher judgments.

It remains to be seen whether moralism stemming from perceived financial lack is genuine or hypocritical. It could be possible that the global economic downturn has an upside, making us better people (at least temporarily) even as it limits our economic prospects. Or it could merely be encouraging us to harden our moral hearts out of self-protection. Also, our experiment doesn’t apply to the complex moral dilemmas often encountered in life, where one must weigh multiple moral options that all have the potential to cause harm.

Despite these lingering questions, it seems clear that if we let them, economic trends can seriously affect our moral reflexes – and thus our responses to others.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/poor-judge-others-more-harshly>

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## About the author(s)

**Stefan Thau** is a Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and the Cora Chaired Professor of Leadership and Learning. Stefan's research examines social decision-making in groups and organisations, such as revenge, trust, reciprocity, discrimination and self-regulation.