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# Not Just Intergroup: The Role of Status Within Groups in the Sandusky Scandal

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The series of events in the 2011 Penn State sexual abuse scandal were tumultuous and complex. Alderfer's (2013) focal article on the group-level phenomena surrounding the scandal provides a unique lens to view these events. However, questions remain about how relationships both within and between the groups involved in the scandal resulted in these outcomes. In particular, *why* did members of groups within Penn State fail to act, whereas people who belonged to other social groups took action? In short, we agree that group and intergroup boundaries were important in this situation, but would like to further elaborate on the underlying mechanisms behind their significance. Beyond the fact that individuals belonged to different groups, what aspects of group dynamics explain the differences in their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in this scandal?

One powerful explanation of this case is status. Status refers to the respect and prestige that one has within a group, which determines the evaluation, participation, and influence of individuals within group

settings (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Indeed, Alderfer attributes Paterno's ability to shield Sandusky and rebuff the administration's request for his own retirement to his individual status in the social hierarchy. We, however, see these examples not as an indication of one individual's role but as occurrences that reveal why status within groups was so important in this matter. Status underlies the performance expectations and evaluations of group members (Driskell & Mullen, 1990; Magee & Galinsky, 2008) and, as such, directly affected how Sandusky's actions were diversely perceived, interpreted, and acted upon by members of various groups. Therefore, we offer an extension of Alderfer's notion of the importance of groups, particularly using Hollander's (1958) theory of status and idiosyncrasy credits to formulate explanations of why group membership differentiated individuals' responses to crucial events.

## Status Within Groups

Status differentiates individuals within social groups based on the respect and prestige granted to them by other group members (Berger et al., 1972; Magee & Galinsky,

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2008). High status and the resources associated with it are more desirable than low status, and thus, people strive to achieve high status within groups. According to Hollander (1958, 1961), status is accumulated over time through an individual's contributions to the group, such as adhering to group norms, affiliating with the group for a long period of time, and performing well within a broad context of group-related tasks. These behaviors elevate the individual's status within the group, in part, because they enhance the prestige of the group relative to other groups.

In the context of groups within Penn State, both Paterno and Sandusky had high status. Both men had been at Penn State the vast majority of their careers and made significant contributions to the success of the football program, the focal social group to which they belonged. These successes, in turn, enhanced the prestige of the university—the broader social group that encompassed the football program. In addition, Paterno and Sandusky contributed to Penn State's prestige in other ways. For example, Paterno generously donated to the university library; Sandusky wrote books about football strategy and established the Second Mile nonprofit organization. Clearly, these two members of the football program and the wider university were respected and esteemed by members of groups within Penn State (the administration and Board of Trustees, the athletic program, etc.). We next describe how Sandusky's status within these groups and other social groups affected individuals' reactions to his deviant behaviors.

### **Status and Idiosyncratic Behavior**

Hollander (1958) first highlighted a paradox of status in groups—that high status group members both conform to norms and are allowed to act in counter normative ways. He proposed that status is gained early on by conforming to group norms and meeting the expectations of the group. However, as individuals accumulate respect and esteem over time, they receive “idiosyncrasy credits,” or

the ability to deviate from the group's norms without being sanctioned for their deviance. Thus, high status group members earn more idiosyncrasy credits than low status group members and are granted leniency rather than disapproval when they act idiosyncratically (Hollander, 1961). Indeed, more recent empirical studies have supported these ideas, showing that group members attribute more idiosyncrasy credits to leaders than to non leaders in group settings (Estrada, Brown, & Lee, 1995) and that high-status group members are both more likely to deviate and are granted leniency when they depart from group norms than are low-status group members, who instead tend to conform to group norms (e.g., Bowles & Gelfand, 2010; Jetten, Hornsey, & Adarves-Yorno, 2006; Shapiro, Boss, Salas, Tangirala, & Von Glinow, 2011; Tarrant & Campbell, 2007).

We argue that idiosyncrasy credits theory provides a key explanation of why members of groups within Penn State (i.e., the football program, the senior administration and trustees) failed to act when Sandusky engaged in criminal behavior. Over time, Sandusky had earned high status and idiosyncrasy credits in these social groups because of his early contributions to their prestige. When Sandusky's behavior became known to others, his high status prompted individuals in these groups to tolerate his actions. Their lenience was evident in the wording that was used in internal group communications about the incidents of misbehavior. For example, football staff and university administrators relabeled the sexual crimes that took place in the showers in less explicit terms (e.g., “horsing around”), and Paterno reframed Sandusky's crimes as a mental health issue when he asked if Sandusky was “getting the help he needed.” Thus behavior that might have been reported to the police if it had been committed by other employees was instead ignored—Sandusky at best received implicit warnings for what group members reinterpreted as minor infractions. As investigations and legal procedures regarding Sandusky's behavior continued,

this modification of language continued to affect the exchange of information between university administrators and the Board of Trustees, such that President Spanier was later criticized for “sanitizing” information that was disclosed to the board.

Given that Sandusky’s actions were clearly against the law, it is intriguing that members of the football program and the administrators of Penn State were lenient with him. We argue that these individuals realized that Sandusky’s actions were severely wrong; however, his status within these groups likely affected their interpretations of and reactions to key events. When high-status individuals deviate, group members give them the benefit of the doubt out of respect for their previous contributions and the group’s established social hierarchy (Estrada et al., 1995; Hollander, 1958, 1961). Though Coach McQueary could have gone to the authorities with what he witnessed in the locker room concerning Sandusky, for example, he acted within the social hierarchy of the football program by disclosing this information to Paterno instead. In short, it may have been difficult for members within university groups to respond dispassionately because of their affiliation and loyalty to Penn State and the high-status members therein (i.e., Paterno and Sandusky).

However, although higher status may lead to greater leniency toward unusual behaviors at first, idiosyncrasy credits are not infinite resources (Hollander, 1958). When idiosyncrasy credits are diminished through repeated deviant behavior, high status individuals no longer have prominence in the group and can eventually lose their affiliation with the group. In the context of the Penn State scandal, Sandusky reached limits in how much his status covered his illicit actions. For example, though he was tolerated by Penn State amid the allegations, he was eventually informed that he would not succeed Paterno as head coach. Ultimately, Sandusky reached the end of his idiosyncrasy credits within these groups when he was asked to retire amid sexual abuse allegations in 1999.

The theory of idiosyncrasy credits also sheds light on why members of groups outside Penn State took action in the situation. Although Sandusky was respected by members of groups outside the football program and Penn State (e.g., State College parents, high school administrators), this esteem was arguably based on his reputation in the community rather than his status within the social hierarchy of these groups earned through specific contributions to their prestige. For example, Sandusky’s performance as a coach contributed to the prestige of the Penn State football program; it did not as directly contribute to the prestige of Mill Hall high school or that of family groups involved in the Second Mile organization. Therefore, Sandusky did not likely build up the idiosyncrasy credits with members of these groups that he had with members of the groups to which he more closely contributed. When members of outside groups became aware of Sandusky’s criminal acts, they did not give him leniency to deviate from expectations and instead took action to sanction him. In particular, when employees of Mill Hall high school became aware of Sandusky’s abuse, they immediately reported this information to the child welfare and criminal justice system.

## Conclusion

The Penn State sexual abuse scandal tragically victimized children and families and resulted in detrimental consequences for the university. We agree with Alderfer’s focus on group membership as a key element of the scandal; however, the role of intragroup status provides a parsimonious explanation for why group membership mattered. Sandusky’s high status within the social hierarchies of Penn State and its football program may have led members of these groups to initially reinterpret Sandusky’s crimes with leniency. Eventually, however, Sandusky’s bank of idiosyncrasy credits ran out and his continued deviance resulted in his exclusion from these focal groups. Moreover, members of other social groups involved in the scandal did not tolerate his

actions, perhaps because his status was not earned within their social hierarchies. As such, individuals outside Sandusky's focal social groups recognized his behavior for what it was and helped bring him to justice.

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