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# Group moral discount: Diffusing blame when judging group members

Sigal Vainapel[1] | Ori Weisel[2] | Ro'i Zultan[3] | Shaul Shalvi[4]

[1] Department of Psychology, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba, Israel

[2] Coller School of Management, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

[3] Department of Economics, Ben-Gurion, University of the Negev, Beersheba, Israel

[4] Center for Research in Experimental Economics and Political Decision Making, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**Correspondence**
Sigal Vainapel, Department of Psychology, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba 8410501, Israel.
Email: sigalv@post.bgu.ac.il

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## Abstract

People lie more when they work as a group rather than alone. However, do people suspect and morally evaluate groups and individuals differently when they are suspiciously successful? In four experiments, we examine whether (a) suspiciously successful individuals and groups are judged and punished differently and (b) individual group members are judged differently from the group as one unit. Results suggest that people suspect successful groups and individuals to the same extent. However, group members are less likely to be suspected, judged negatively, punished, and reported on, when they are judged as separate individuals compared with as a group. The findings demonstrate a bias in judgment of group members, stemming from the method of evaluation—holistic or separate. We suggest that in order to minimize bias when judging misconduct by a group, the moral evaluation and punishment of all group members should be considered simultaneously.

**KEYWORDS**

decision making, dishonesty, ethical behavior, group behavior, judgment

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Unethical behavior and moral judgment are commonly studied at the individual level, whereas actual misconduct is often carried out by groups (Ford & Richardson, 1994; Rosenbaum, Billinger, & Stieglitz, 2014). Although people can cheat alone, various unethical behaviors, such as bribery and embezzlement, require the collaboration of two people or more (e.g., two students consulting each other during an exam, a pickpocket stalling a pedestrian while another steals items from her bag, or a company manager bribing a tax official to avoid tax payments). Although past research has shown that people behave more unethically when acting as a group than when acting individually (e.g., Conrads, Irlenbusch, Rilke, & Walkowitz, 2013; Kocher, Schudy, & Spantig, 2017; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015), it remains unclear how people *perceive* suspiciously successful outcomes when achieved by groups rather than individuals.

We focus on behavior that can be accomplished by individuals or by groups of two persons and more, from which the individual, or *all* group members, can profit. We examine common situations where there is not enough information to verify whether suspicious behavior is unethical or not. Would a single slacking student with a suspicious and unlikely high grade in an exam be suspected of cheating to the same extent as a group of students? Is a person suspected of involvement in fraud blamed to the same extent as a person committing the same felony with an accomplice? We address these questions by examining whether people perceive suspiciously successful *individuals* differently from similarly successful *groups*. We further distinguish between the judgment of *groups* and *group members* and explore whether group members are judged differently when considered separately, as compared with when the whole group is considered as a single unit. For example, consider cheating on exams: Would an individual student consulting a cheat sheet during an exam be judged as unethical as two students consulting each other? Moreover, would considering the two students' actions together as one group would lead to different judgments of blame than when evaluating each student on its own? We explore these questions by examining (a) judgments of blame and suspiciousness of unethical behavior of groups and individuals and (b) the punitive actions (i.e., monetary punishment and whistle blowing on suspect behavior) people are willing to impose on these individuals or groups.

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## 1.1 | Moral behavior in groups

There is a constant dilemma between increasing gains and staying true to one's values. Most people want to think of themselves as moral and honest but do not always behave accordingly (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Bersoff, 1999; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008), especially if unethical behavior can aid them in reaching their goals (Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, & Bazerman, 2009; Schweitzer, Ordóñez, & Douma, 2004). It was suggested that people resolve this tension by acting dishonestly as long as they can frame it in a way that would not hurt their moral self-image (Ayal & Gino, 2011; Mazar et al., 2008). For example, people find it easier to lie when lies are small (Mazar et al., 2008), can be justified (Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011; Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, & Ayal, 2015), or are prosocial (Erat & Gneezy, 2012; Gino & Pierce, 2009; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015). Furthermore, people are less likely to lie when the morality is salient in the situation (Ayal, Gino, Barkan, & Ariely, 2015; Shu, Mazar, Gino, Ariely, & Bazerman, 2012).

People also find it easier to behave dishonestly when they are part of a group than when they act alone (Shalvi, Weisel, Kochavi-Gamliel, & Leib, 2016) and lie more when they receive group incentives, rather than individual incentives, for their performance on a task (Cohen, Gunia, Kim-Jun, & Murnighan, 2009; Conrads et al., 2013; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015), especially if they have a close relationship with other members of the group (Danilov, Biemann, Kring, & Sliwka, 2013) or if they can communicate with them (Kocher et al., 2017). In a similar vein, people are more likely to lie when they are not the only ones benefiting from their dishonesty (Church, Hannan, & Kuang, 2012; Wiltermuth, 2011) and are less likely to feel guilt afterwards (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013). Just priming for a collective mindset is enough to influence people to behave less ethically (by bribing another person; Mazar & Aggarwal, 2011).

As a case in point, consider the task used by Weisel and Shalvi (2015; similarly see Soraperra et al., 2017; Gross, Leib, Offerman, & Shalvi, forthcoming) who had participants engage in a die rolling task either in dyads or individually. In the dyad condition, two participants, A and B, roll a die sequentially: A privately rolls the die and reports the outcome, B learns what A reported, and then privately rolls the die and reports the outcome as well. Participants profit only when both report the same number (a double), in which case each receives that number in Euros. For example, if both A and B report rolling a "6," each receives €6 and if both report "5," each receives €5. In the individual condition, the same participant rolls the die twice and is paid in the same way as the dyad. If the individual reports the same outcome for both die rolls, she or he receives the corresponding amount in Euros. Weisel and Shalvi found that participants lie more when they are part of a dyad compared with when they complete the task individually.

Dishonesty is not the only way groups can exhibit self-serving behavior. Groups behave more competitively and aggressively than individuals, even when the behavior is directed at individuals (Meier & Hinsz, 2004; Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003; Winquist & Larson, 2004), and groups are more honest than individuals when they believe that honesty can be used strategically to increase their profits (Cohen et al., 2009; Sutter, 2009). Even when not using full scale lies, groups use more deceptive tactics to gain more profit, such as omitting information from others (Aykac, Wilken, Jacob, & Prime, 2017), and are more likely to break promises to cooperate (Nielsen, Bhattacharya, Kagel, & Sengupta, 2017).

Past research suggests two main explanations for the excessive lying (and other self-serving behaviors) when working as a group. The first is the reduced responsibility each group member feels for the ethicality of the group's behavior (Conrads et al., 2013). The second is that lying in a group is easier to justify. Lies that benefit others as well are considered as more moral and acceptable than selfish lies (Gino & Pierce, 2009; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015). Therefore, the presence of group members that profit from a person's dishonest behavior can make the behavior seem more acceptable and thus increase lying (Gino et al., 2013; Wiltermuth, 2011).

Although dishonesty is more pervasive in groups than in individuals, it remains unknown whether groups are *perceived* differently than individuals when suspected of ethical misconduct. That is, whether the same behavior, for example, reporting a 6–6 outcome —which is rather unlikely (1 in 36) but is clearly the most profitable—would generate more (or less) suspicion when carried out by a group rather than by an individual. If people believe that groups lie more than individuals, they should suspect groups to a greater extent and perceive them as more dishonest after observing the same, or comparable, suspicious behavior. If people do not hold such beliefs, they should suspect groups and individuals to the same extent.

It is also important to understand whether and how suspicion towards individuals and groups is acted upon. In some cases, people have the power to punish those who do not follow the norms. However, unethical behavior is oftentimes noticed by people who are not directly affected by it or are not in charge of evaluating suspicious behavior or responding to it. How do "outsiders" react to groups' or individuals' suspiciously dishonest behavior? Namely, would they be willing to report such behavior to the authorities (whistle-blowing)[1]?

Whistle-blowing intentions have been found to be related to the ethical culture of the organization (Kaptein, 2011; Miceli & Near, 1985), to monetary incentives to report the offense (Miceli & Near, 1984; Xu & Ziegenfuss, 2008), to whistle-blowers' chances of finding a new job (Miceli & Near, 1984), to observers' levels of moral reasoning (Xu & Ziegenfuss, 2008), and to the extent to which people observing a wrongdoing are extravert and agreeable (Bjørkelo, Einarsen, & Matthiesen, 2010). As whistle-blowing can be a costly behavior, whistle-blowing intentions do not always translate into behavior, and actual whistle-blowing behavior is rare (Bocchiaro, Zimbardo, & Van Lange, 2012).

Punishing and whistle-blowing directed at groups and individuals may be different even when evaluations of morality and legitimacy are similar. Groups may seem more threatening and powerful than single individuals, and punishing them may be more costly in the future. Yet if judgment is in line with punitive behavior, and groups

[1]Whistle-blowing: cases where "Organization members who disclose employers' illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices which are under the control of their employers to persons or organizations who may be able to affect action" (Miceli & Near, 1992, p. 689).

are perceived as more suspicious than individuals, then groups should be punished more severely.

## 1.2 | Judging groups versus judging group members

A related question is whether each member of a suspicious group is suspected more or less than the group itself, when evaluated as a single unit. Whereas we expect that groups would be perceived as more dishonest compared with individuals when acting suspiciously, there are reasons to believe that individual group members, when judged separately, would be suspected to a lesser extent than the group itself.

The perception of individuals and groups is not identical. Although each individual is assumed to be influenced by a consistent set of traits and is therefore expected to act in a coherent manner, group members are expected to be somewhat different from each other, and groups are thus expected to be less coherent than individuals (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Park, DeKay, & Kraus, 1994; Weisz & Jones, 1993). As a result, people find group behavior to be less diagnostic of each group members' traits than individual behavior is diagnostic of the individual's traits (Skowronski, 2002). Therefore, it is likely that when encountering a dishonest act by a group, people would not be quick to form an impression of each individual group member as dishonest. Supporting evidence for this notion comes from research showing that in individualistic cultures—but not in collectivistic cultures—people were found to be less responsible for failures and crimes when they were the result of a collaboration with another person as compared with similar individual behaviors (Feldman & Rosen, 1978; Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999).

The literature has focused on a number of variables that can affect judgment of groups and their members. Group members would be more likely to be judged by the actions of their group when the group is perceived to be more cohesive or entitative (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Waytz & Young, 2012); when group members are similar (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998; Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999); or when their actions are joint (Newheiser, Sawaoka, & Dovidio, 2012). Another interesting moderator is whether the group is processed holistically or separately (Bartels & Burnett, 2011). For example, Amir, Kogut, and Bereby-Meyer (2016) investigated the singularity effect in a cheating situation. According to the singularity effect of identified victims, a single victim elicits more empathy than a group of victims (Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). Therefore, people should be more likely to cheat groups than individuals, as the harm to the group members is perceived to be minor (Konis, Haran, Saporta, & Ayal, 2016). However, this is the case only when the negative externality for the group is presented globally (the total harm to the group) rather than for each group member separately (Amir et al., 2016), suggesting that evaluating each group member separately might change the way the group is judged.

Another phenomenon that can explain behavior and judgment of group members is the *diffusion of responsibility*, according to which the responsibility for the outcome of a group's behavior is diffused between all group members (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Mynatt & Sherman, 1975). When others are around, people feel less responsible to help a person in need (Bickman, 1972; Darley & Latané, 1968; Latane & Nida, 1981) and are less likely to intervene when observing norm violations (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002). Diffusion of responsibility was also used to explain why working in a group leads to more risk-taking (Wallach, Kogan, & Bem, 1962, 1964) and aggressive behavior (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975) than working alone. The reduced responsibility in a group leads individuals to invest less in a joint effort (i.e., "social loafing"), both in relatively easy tasks such as cheering (Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979; Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981) and in complicated cognitive tasks that require information processing (Petty, Harkins, & Williams, 1980).

Diffusion of responsibility can also explain the extensive rate of dishonesty in groups, as people working in a group may feel less responsible for their group's action, and thus less motivated to avoid unethical behavior. Although diffusion of responsibility is often used to explain behavior in groups, there is only sparse research using this framework to try to explain the judgment of groups and group members (Feldman & Rosen, 1978; Mynatt & Sherman, 1975). If diffusion of responsibility also takes place when judging others, people should attribute less blame to each group member for the group's unethical behavior.

When examining diffusion of blame among group members, we should also consider that not only the assigned responsibility should be reduced but also the perceived severity of the act itself. As mentioned before, one of the suggested reasons for excessive dishonesty in groups is the prosocial component of lying; when lying in a group, other group members can also profit from the lies (Gino et al., 2013; Gino & Pierce, 2009; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015; Wiltermuth, 2011). When judging a dishonest group as one unit, or a dishonest individual, one would think that their behavior is entirely self-serving. However, this would not be the case when judging a single group member, who is also acting prosocially toward her group members. Therefore, each single group member should not only be assigned less blame for their potentially dishonest actions than the group but their actions should also be perceived as more legitimate than the group's.

## 1.3 | Overview of the current experiments

We conducted four experiments to examine whether people judge and suspect individuals, groups, and group members to different extents. In all experiments, participants read a scenario about a coin-tossing task, in which either a single person or a dyad tossed a coin twice, reported the outcome, and received money if the reported outcomes were identical (a "double"). The task was performed privately, such that the player(s) had the opportunity to misreport the actual coin toss outcomes. Participants read that the individuals or two-person groups engaged in the task and reported an unlikely high (and thus suspicious) amount of doubles. In Experiment 1, participants rated their suspicion of the reported outcomes in the coin-tossing task, the legitimacy of the behavior of the group or individual performing the task, and their willingness to punish them. In Experiment 2, we examined whether people differ in their suspicion of groups when the group members are judged together or separately. In Experiment 3, we examined whether the effect of holistic and separate evaluations of group members is present also when we vary

the history of the players' reports or their contribution to the group's success. Lastly, Experiment 4 reexamined whether people differ in their suspicion, legitimacy ratings, reporting, and punishment of groups and individuals in an altered coin-tossing task, in which individuals were matched with a random device as a partner and were thus responsible for less suspicious reports.

The literature reviewed above leads to a number of hypotheses. If people are aware that groups are less honest than individuals, they should suspect groups more and judge them as less ethical. Hypothesis 1 is thus: Suspiciously, successful groups would be perceived as more likely to be dishonest than similarly successful individuals. If judging group members separately, as opposed to judging a group as a unit, increases diffusion of responsibility and lessens the perceived selfishness of the dishonest actions, then group members judged separately should be suspected and blamed more than their group. Accordingly, Hypothesis 2 postulates that suspiciously, successful groups would be suspected more and judged as less honest than their separate group members.

## 2 | EXPERIMENT 1

### 2.1 | Method

#### 2.1.1 | Participants and procedure

One hundred and three psychology students participated in an online survey in exchange for course credit. Participants, who were asked to read a scenario about a coin-toss task, were randomly assigned to read about either (a) an individual who completed the task alone or (b) a group of two players who completed the task together. The task was simple. In the individual scenario, a single person privately tossed a coin twice and reported the outcomes (see similarly, Shalvi, 2012; Zimerman, Shalvi, & Bereby-Meyer, 2014). In the group scenario, each group member privately tossed a coin once and reported the outcome, for a total of two tosses. If "heads" was reported on both tosses, each player (i.e., the individual player or *each* player in the group) received 10 ILS (~$2.5); if "tails" was reported on both tosses, each player received 5 ILS (~$1.3); finally, in case different outcomes were reported (e.g., "heads" followed by "tails"), no payment was received. This paradigm allows to assess two types of lies: falsely reporting a double when the actual outcome is not a double and reporting the more profitable outcome ("heads") instead of the less profitable one ("tails").

Participants read that the task was completed eight times in a row. In one condition, participants were asked to evaluate one person reporting the outcome of both coin tosses (individual condition). In another condition, participants were asked to evaluate two people, each reporting the outcome of the first or second coin toss outcome (group condition). The coins were tossed sequentially, such that in the group condition, the second group member knew what the first group member reported before tossing the second coin. It was made clear to participants that only the people reporting the coin toss outcome knew what the actual outcome was and were thus able to misreport the actual outcome in order to increase their gains.

After reading the scenario, participants answered three comprehension questions about the payoffs in the scenario (e.g., "If the people typed in that the outcome of the first coin-toss is 'tails' and the outcome of the second coin-toss is 'tails', each person will receive ____ ILS"; see Data S1). Five participants were excluded from the analysis because they failed to correctly answer at least one of the comprehension questions, which left us with 98 participants for the analysis. The objective likelihood of false reports was manipulated within-subjects and was either low (50% of reported outcomes were doubles, which is the expected value assuming honest reports) or high (75% of reported outcomes were doubles). There were two variations of the high likelihood: In the first, labeled "high-double-tails," most of the reported doubles were the less profitable double-tails; in the second, "high-double-heads," most of the reported doubles were the more profitable double-heads (see Data S1 for the full set of outcomes). The order of reported outcomes was randomized in each condition.

After viewing each set of outcomes, participants rated the individual or the group that reported those outcomes by answering three questions: (a) "In your opinion, what is the likelihood that the outcomes reported by the person [s] are untrue?" (b) "In your opinion, to what extent is [are] the person [s] honest?" (c) "If you could have punished the person [s], would you choose to do so and prevent him/her/them from getting paid?" All questions were answered on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). In order to verify that different evaluations of groups' and individuals' behavior are not influenced by participants' ability to comprehend the objective probability of the reported results, we measured their numeracy ability. Numeracy skills were measured by a questionnaire adapted from Peters et al. (2006; see Data S1).

### 2.2 | Results and discussion

Ratings of suspicion, honesty, and punishment were administered to separate repeated measure analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with target (individual vs. group) as a between-subjects factor and the proportion of reported doubles (high proportion of double heads; high proportion of double tails; low proportion of doubles) as a within-subjects variable. The analyses reported here do not control for numeracy as it did not affect any of the reported results (see the Data S1 for the full analysis including the numeracy skills).

A significant main effect was found for proportion of reported doubles on suspicion, honesty and punishment, $F(2, 192) = 42.23$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.31$; $F(2, 192) = 36.52$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.28$; $F(2, 192) = 26.28$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.22$, respectively. Simple effects analyses show that high proportion of double heads was considered as more suspicious ($p < 0.001$), less honest ($p = 0.06$), and as more deserving punishment ($p = 0.07$) than high proportion of double tails, which were considered as more suspicious, dishonest, and punishable than behavior that could be plausibly attributed to honest reporting (reporting a low proportion of doubles; all $p < 0.001$; means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1).

There was no significant main effect for target of judgment on ratings of suspicion, honesty, and punishment, $F(1, 96) = 0.34$, $p = 0.563$; $F(2, 192) = 2.72$, $p = 0.102$; $F(1, 96) = 0.02$, $p = 0.881$, respectively. The interaction term was also not significant for ratings of suspicion, honesty, and punishment, $F(2, 192) = 0.87$, $p = 0.419$;

**TABLE 1** Experiment 1: descriptive statistics

| | | Individual | Group |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Proportion of reported doubles | M (SD) | M (SD) |
| Suspicion | Low proportion of doubles | 2.88 (1.33) | 3.02 (1.7) |
| | High proportion of double tails | 4.29 (1.72) | 4.1 (1.77) |
| | High proportion of double heads | 4.88 (1.39) | 4.51 (1.7) |
| Legitimacy | Low proportion of doubles | 4.94 (1.44) | 5.16 (1.55) |
| | High proportion of double tails | 3.65 (1.56) | 4.08 (1.8) |
| | High proportion of double heads | 3.33 (1.35) | 3.86 (1.71) |
| Punishment | Low proportion of doubles | 1.88 (1.25) | 2.06 (1.59) |
| | High proportion of double tails | 2.73 (1.78) | 2.69 (1.88) |
| | High proportion of double heads | 3 (1.96) | 3 (2.09) |

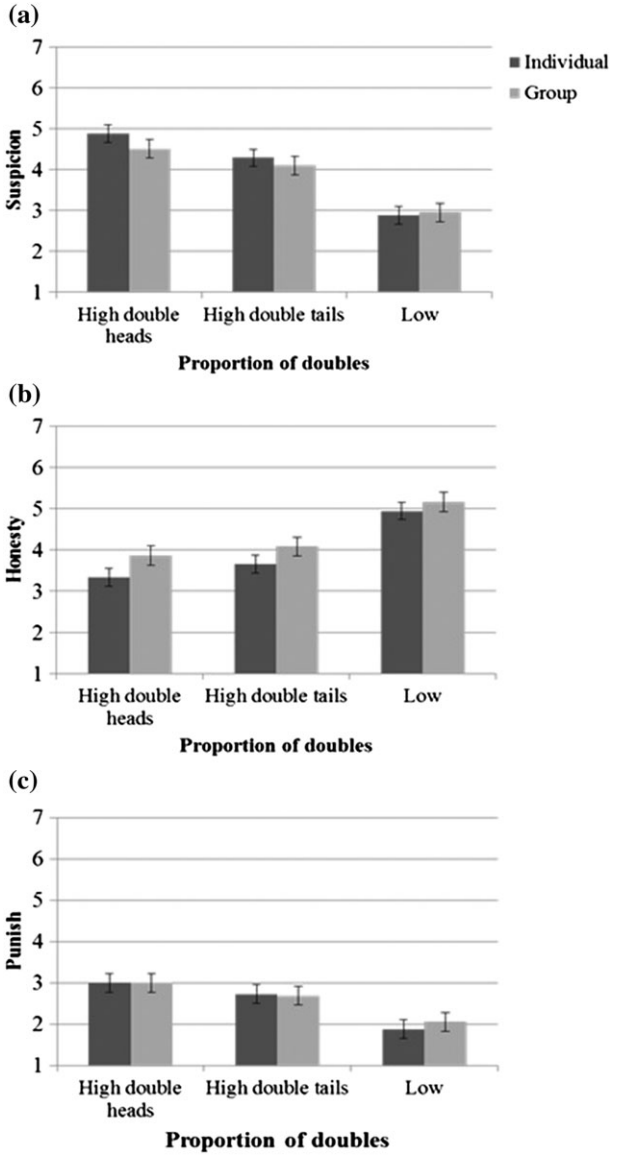


**FIGURE 1** Experiment 1 results: (a) suspicion, (b) honesty, and (c) willingness to punish an individual or a group. Error bars represent +1 SE around the mean

$F(2, 192) = 0.43$, $p = 0.692$; $F(2, 192) = 0.33$, $p = 0.716$; see Figure 1. Overall, participants did not suspect groups more (or less) than individuals, judged groups and individuals as equally honest, and were willing to punish them to the same extent.

## 3 | EXPERIMENT 2

The findings from Experiment 1 did not support Hypothesis 1. In contrast to the prediction, the results suggest that groups are not suspected to be more (or less) dishonest than individuals and are punished similarly. In Experiment 1, however, the two individuals in the group were evaluated together, potentially influencing the suspicion levels people experience towards each of them separately. Experiment 2 disentangled the type of evaluation, examining how the behavior of each person in the group is judged separately. Thus, in Experiment 2, we asked participants to judge one of four targets: an individual completing the task alone, a group composed by Group Member A and Group Member B, Group Member A separately, and Group Member B separately.

### 3.1 | Method

#### 3.1.1 | Participants and procedure

Two hundred and forty-two participants completed an online survey on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Thirty participants were excluded from the analysis because they failed to answer correctly at least one of the reading comprehension checks (see Data S1), and two participants were excluded because they failed to answer an attentiveness check (i.e., "Please mark 'Strongly Agree' as your answer"), leaving 210 participants for the analysis. Participants read about the coin-tossing task as in Experiment 1, but in Experiment 2, they had to judge one of four targets: (a) an individual participating in the task alone, (b) a group of two participants (A and B), (c) the first player in a group (i.e., person A), or (d) the second player in a group (i.e., person B). The monetary gains from the task were adapted to U.S. dollars; the individual player, or each player in a group, received \$4 for reporting double heads and \$2 for reporting double tails. After reading the scenario, participants had to answer three comprehension questions similar to those in Experiment 1. Each participant evaluated three blocks, each including coin toss reports from eight coin-toss trials: In one block, the targets reported a low proportion of doubles (50%; the expected value if players are honest), in a second block, they reported an intermediate proportion of doubles (75% doubles; half the doubles are heads and half are tails), and in a third block, they reported a high proportion of doubles (100% doubles; 80% of the doubles are heads; see table 2 in Data S1). The order of the blocks was counterbalanced.

After each set of outcomes, participants were asked to express their suspicion by evaluating the target's dishonesty using five statements (e.g., "To what extent do you believe the person lied?"; $\alpha$'s > = 0.89; unless stated otherwise, all measures were presented on a scale of 1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*very much*]); the perceived legitimacy of the acts using four statements (e.g., "To what extent do you believe it is wrong to report as the person reported?"; $\alpha$'s > = 0.85); and their willingness to punish the target by deducting money from this person's profits (or from *each group member* in the group condition;

between $0 and $10). The decision to create two distinct scales for dishonesty and legitimacy is conceptual: The dishonesty scales assess whether the player is believed to act honestly or not, and the legitimacy scale measures whether the behavior is acceptable or not (the correlation between the items and a factor analysis are reported in the Data S1). At the end of the experiment, participants answered a general trust questionnaire (three statements; $\alpha = 0.82$) and a caution questionnaire (six statements; $\alpha = 0.89$; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994; for full scales, see Data S1) to control for general trust and caution in assessing differences in suspicion.

## 3.2 | Results and discussion

Scores of each dependent variable were administered separately into a repeated measures ANOVA with target (Group Member A; Group Member B; group; individual) as a between-subjects variable and proportion of doubles (high; intermediate; low) as a within-subjects variable. In all analyses, adding participants' rating of general trust and caution to the ANOVA did not affect the results (see Data S1 for these analyses).

We found a significant main effect for the proportion of reported doubles on ratings of suspicion, legitimacy, and punishment, $F(2, 412) = 309.06$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.6$; $F(2, 412) = 294.03$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.59$; $F(2, 412) = 309.06$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.6$, respectively. In addition, a significant main effect was found for the target of judgment on ratings of suspicion, $F(3, 206) = 6.96$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$, and legitimacy, $F(3, 206) = 4.38$, $p = 0.005$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$, but not for punishment, $F(3, 206) = 2$, $p = 0.115$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. The analyses also revealed significant interactions between the target and the proportion of reported doubles for ratings of suspicion, legitimacy, and punishment, $F(6, 412) = 4.91$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$; $F(6, 412) = 4.13$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$; $F(6, 412) = 4.14$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$, respectively; see Table 2.

As can be seen in Figure 2, suspicion, perceived legitimacy, and inflicted punishment differed significantly between the judgment targets (i.e., group, individual, Group Member A, and Group Member B) when they reported a high proportion of doubles, $F(3, 206) = 12.65$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.16$; $F(3, 206) = 16.17$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.11$; $F(3, 206) = 5.27$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$, respectively. Simple effects analyses revealed that, as predicted, when the reports contained a high proportion of doubles, Group Member A (first player in the group) was suspected the least ($p$'s < 0.05), and her behavior was perceived as most legitimate ($p$'s < 0.05). Group Member B (second player in the group) was suspected more ($p < 0.05$) and was perceived to act less legitimately than Group Member A ($p < 0.05$). Both group members were perceived as less suspicious and their behavior as more legitimate than the group as a whole and the individual ($p$'s < 0.05), whereas the

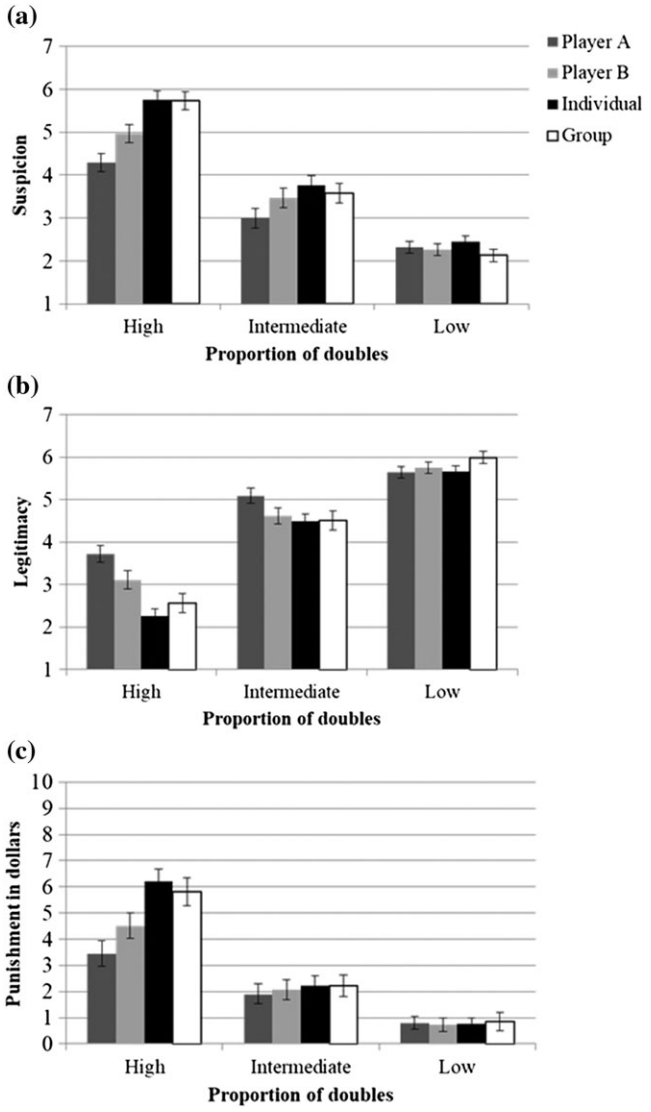


**FIGURE 2** Experiment 2 results: Ratings of (a) suspicion, (b) legitimacy, and (c) punishment inflicted when judging an individual, a group, or group members. Punishment in the group condition is per group member. Error bars represent +1 SE around the mean

**TABLE 2** Experiment 2: descriptive statistics

| | | Player A | Player B | Individual | Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Reported proportion of doubles | *M* (*SD*) | *M* (*SD*) | *M* (*SD*) | *M* (*SD*) |
| Suspicion | Low proportion | 2.32 (1.16) | 2.27 (1.09) | 2.44 (1.07) | 2.13 (1.08) |
| | Intermediate proportion | 2.99 (1.51) | 3.47 (1.49) | 3.76 (1.4) | 3.58 (1.52) |
| | High proportion | 4.29 (1.2) | 4.96 (1.45) | 5.76 (1.2) | 5.74 (1.33) |
| Legitimacy | Low proportion | 5.64 (1.13) | 5.75 (1.04) | 5.65 (.89) | 6 (1.01) |
| | Intermediate proportion | 5.02 (1.32) | 4.61 (1.45) | 4.48 (1.32) | 4.51 (1.58) |
| | High proportion | 3.71 (1.62) | 3.11 (1.42) | 2.52 (1.27) | 2.56 (1.43) |
| Punishment | Low proportion | 0.79 (1.87) | 0.74 (1.77) | 0.76 (1.87) | 0.86 (2.32) |
| | Intermediate proportion | 1.89 (3.06) | 2.07 (3.03) | 2.22 (3.32) | 2.21 (2.68) |
| | High proportion | 3.49 (3.76) | 4.51 (3.84) | 6.2 (3.9) | 5.8 (4.03) |

*Note*. Punishment in the group condition is per group member.

group and the individual were evaluated similarly ($p > 0.897$). Moreover, each group member (when the group is evaluated as one unit) and the individual were punished to a greater extent than Group Member A and Group Member B ($p$'s < 0.05, except for the difference between Group Member B and the group, which is $p = 0.09$).

A marginally significant difference in the suspicion of the judgment targets was also found when they reported an intermediate proportion of doubles, $F(3, 206) = 2.48$, $p = 0.062$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$: Group Member A was suspected less than the individual and the group ($p$'s < = 0.05). However, no differences were found in the legitimacy evaluation and punishment inflicted on the targets when they reported an intermediate proportion of doubles, $F(3, 206) = 2.01$, $p = 0.114$; $F(3, 206) = 1.01$, $p = 0.955$. Furthermore, no differences were found in the evaluations of the targets when they reported a low proportion of doubles, suspicion: $F(3, 206) = 0.729$, $p = 0.536$; legitimacy: $F(3, 206) = 1.34$, $p = 0.262$; punishment: $F(3, 206) = 0.04$, $p = 991$.

The finding from Experiment 1, showing that groups and individuals are perceived as equally suspicious, is replicated in Experiment 2. The key finding in Experiment 2 is that when people are asked to evaluate only one group member, they judge the behavior of this group member as less suspicious than that of the group when judged as one unit. When a suspiciously high number of doubles were reported, both Group Members' (A and B) actions were perceived as more legitimate, less dishonest, and they were less likely to be punished for their behavior compared with the group as a whole. Importantly, people are less suspicious towards person B who matches the reported outcomes of her partner (A) in 100% of the cases (i.e., lies) than they are towards a single person who reports 100% doubles alone.

## 4 | EXPERIMENT 3

Experiment 3 has three additional goals, which we address in two versions of the experiment. Both versions include a measure of whistle-blowing intentions, operationalized by asking participants whether they would have reported their suspicion to the experimenter.[2]

In Experiment 3a, we additionally examine the effects of previous behavior (reputation) on judgment. Previous ethical misconduct can influence people's subsequent behavior, as well as other's judgments of the behavior (Gino & Bazerman, 2009; Merritt, Effron & Monin, 2010; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004; Yaniv & Kleinberger, 2000). For example, behavior that gradually becomes dishonest is likely to go unnoticed (Gino & Bazerman, 2009), and previously moral behavior may grant the actor moral credentials, enabling her to act suspiciously in the future without harming her moral identity or the way it is perceived by others (Effron & Monin, 2010; Krumm & Corning, 2008). However, as groups are perceived as a less coherent unit than individuals (Susskind, Maurer, Thakkar, Hamilton, & Sherman, 1999), previous behavior by groups may not have the same effect on the way they are perceived. Therefore, in Experiment 3a, we present participants with information about players' past ethical behavior and examine the effect of such information on the evaluation of individuals' and groups' current behavior.

Lastly, in Experiment 3b, we examine whether the diffusion of blame also occurs when the two group members do not "play along" with each other. When both group members act suspiciously, their combined behavior may be perceived as inflated when judging them as one group. Therefore, in Experiment 3b, we examined the case where Group Member A is apparently honest (i.e., reports 50% heads) and *only* Group Member B is responsible for the group's suspicious success (i.e., always matches A's report).

### 4.1 | Experiment 3a

#### 4.1.1 | Method

**Participants and procedure**

Four hundred and three participants filled out an online survey distributed through mTurk. Forty participants were excluded from the analysis because they failed to answer correctly at least one of the reading comprehension questions (see Data S1) and/or failed to answer an attentiveness check (i.e., "Please mark 'Strongly Agree' as your answer"). Thus, 363 participants were left for the analysis.

Participants read about the coin-toss task as in Experiments 1 and 2 and had to judge one of four targets: (a) an individual participating in the task alone, (b) a group of two players, (c) the first player in a group (Group Member A), or (d) the second player in a group (Group Member B). Each participant evaluated the outcomes of two blocks of eight coin-toss trials; one in which the targets reported a low proportion of doubles (50%), and one in which they reported a high proportion of doubles (100% doubles, 80% of which are heads). The order of the two blocks was counterbalanced between participants.

As in Experiment 2, after each block participants were asked to express their suspicion by evaluating the target's dishonesty using five statements ($\alpha$'s > = 0.86; unless stated otherwise, all measures were presented on a scale of 1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*very much*]) and the perceived legitimacy of the acts using four statements ($\alpha$'s > = 0.83). Additionally, participants stated their willingness to report suspicious outcomes to the experimenter. Finally, participants expressed their willingness to punish the target by deducting money from this person's profits (or from each group member in the group condition; between $0 and $10). At the end of the experiment, participants completed a general trust questionnaire (three statements; $\alpha = 0.82$) and a caution questionnaire (six statements; $\alpha = 0.89$; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994) to control for general trust and caution.

#### 4.1.2 | Results

Scores of each dependent variable were administered separately to a repeated measures ANOVA with target (Group Member A; Group Member B; group; individual) and report history (low proportion of doubles first; high proportion of doubles first) as between-subjects variables, and the proportion of doubles (high; low) as a within-subjects variable. As in Experiment 2, adding participants' ratings of general trust and caution to the ANOVA did not affect the results (see Data S1 for full analysis).

[2]Although whistle-blowing intentions in a scenario context might be inflated relative to actual levels of whistle-blowing behavior in the field (Bocchiaro et al., 2012), it is a proxy for the willingness to whistle-blow, thus allowing us to compare the willingness to report different targets.

Replicating the results from Experiment 2, we found a significant main effect for the target condition on suspicion, legitimacy, and on the punishment inflicted on the players, $F(3, 355) = 16.05$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$; $F(3, 355) = 11.28$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$; $F(3, 355) = 333.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .48$; $F(3, 355) = 2.84$, $p = 0.038$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, respectively. The main effect for the target condition was also found on the willingness to whistle-blow on the players, $F(3,355) = 2.45$, $p = 0.063$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. A main effect for the proportion of reported doubles was also found on suspicion, legitimacy, punishment, and whistle-blowing, $F(1, 355) = 854.22$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.71$; $F(1, 355) = 698.38$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.66$; $F[1,355] = 333.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .48$; $F(1, 355) = 286.59$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.45$, respectively. As was found in Experiment 2, these effects were qualified by an interaction between the target of judgement and the proportion of reported doubles on ratings of suspicion, legitimacy, punishment, and whistle-blowing, $F(3,355) = 9.01$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$; $F(3,355) = 8.23$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$; $F(3,355) = 8.18$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$; $F(3,355) = 6.92$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$.

As can be seen in Figure 3, there was a significant difference in the perceived legitimacy of the judgment targets (i.e., group, individual, Group Member A, and Group Member B), the punishment inflicted on them, and whistle-blowing intentions when they reported a high proportion of doubles, $F(3, 355) = 15.35$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$; $F(3, 355) = 6.99$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$; $F(3, 355) = 6.56$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$, respectively, but not when they reported a low proportion of doubles, $F(3\ 355) = 1.69$, $p = 0.17$; $F(3, 355) = 0.81$, $p = 0.805$; $F(3, 355) = 0.56$, $p = 0.643$. Moreover, participants rated the suspicion of the targets differently when they reported both high and low proportion of doubles, $F(3, 355) = 18.61$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.14$; $F(3, 355) = 3.66$, $p = 0.036$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$; for high and low, respectively (see Table 3).

Simple effects analyses revealed that when the reports had a high proportion of doubles, Group Member A (the first player in the group) was evaluated as the least suspicious and as having the most legitimate behavior (all $p$'s < 0.01); and Group Member B (second player in the group) was suspected to a lesser extent and was perceived as acting more legitimately compared with the group and the individual (all $p$'s < 0.01). Group Members A and B were also reported to a lesser extent compared with the group and the individual and punished to a lesser extent compared with each member of the group when evaluated as one unit (all $p$'s < 0.05). The individual and the group were evaluated the same.

A significant main effect was also found for report history on suspicion and legitimacy ratings, and the effect on the willingness to whistle-blow was marginally significant, $F(1, 355) = 13.33$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$; $F(1, 355) = 7.39$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$; $F(1, 355) = 3.26$, $p = 0.07$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$, respectively. Participants rated the targets' behavior as more suspicious and less legitimate and were more likely to report them when the block containing a low proportion of doubles was presented first ($M_{Suspicion} = 4.13$, $SD_{Suspicion} = 1.3$; $M_{Legitimate} = 4.02$, $SD_{Legitimate} = 1.32$; $M_{Whistle\text{-}blow} = 3.53$, $SD_{Whistle\text{-}blow} = 1.99$) than when it was presented second ($M_{Suspicion} = 3.8$, $SD_{Suspicion} = 1.2$; $M_{SLegitimate} = 4.25$, $SD_{Legitimate} = 1.26$; $M_{Whistle\text{-}blow} = 3.23$, $SD_{Whistle\text{-}blow} = 1.92$). No effect was found for report history on punishment, $F(1,355) = 1.54$, $p = 0.216$, no interaction effects with report history were found on any of the dependent measure, and there was no three-way interaction.

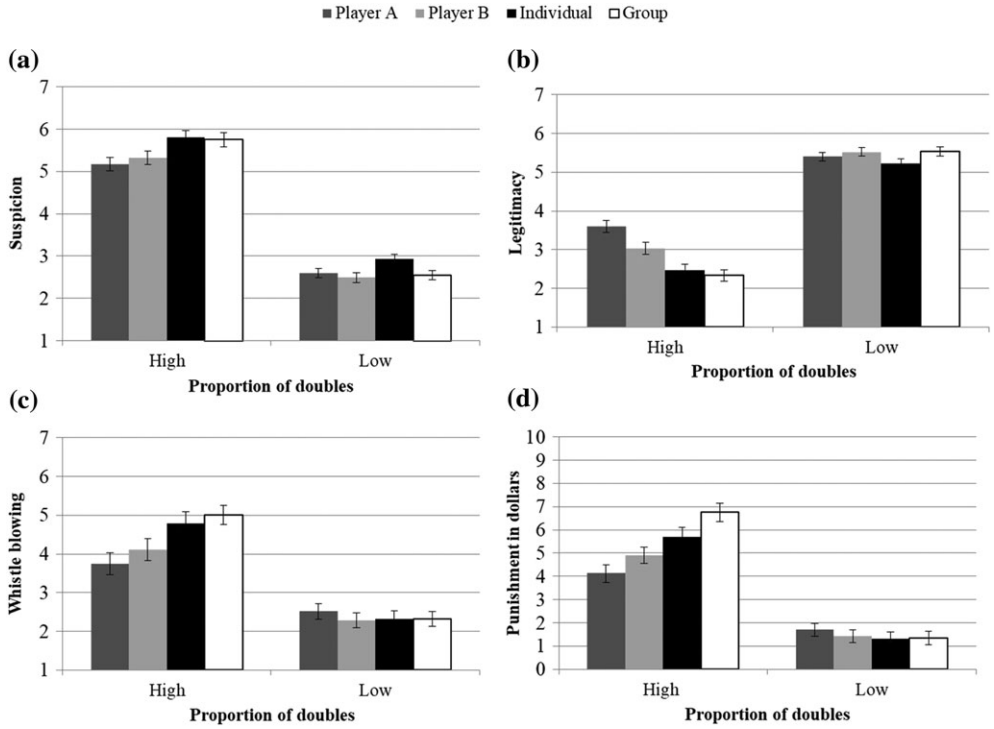


**FIGURE 3** Experiment 3a results: Ratings of (a) suspicion, (b) legitimacy, (c) willingness to whistle-blow, and (d) punishment inflicted when judging an individual, a group, or group members. Punishment in the group condition is per group member. Error bars represent +1 SE around the mean

**TABLE 3** Experiment 3a: descriptive statistics

| | | Player A | Player B | Individual | Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Reported doubles | *M* (*SD*) | *M* (*SD*) | *M* (*SD*) | *M* (*SD*) |
| Suspicion | Low proportion of double | 2.6 (.92) | 2.49 (1.14) | 2.93 (1.09) | 2.55 (1.17) |
| | High proportion of double | 4.46 (1.6) | 5.17 (1.41) | 2.93 (1.09) | 2.55 (1.17) |
| Legitimacy | Low proportion of double | 5.4 (1.03) | 5.52 (1.17) | 5.23 (1.14) | 5.51 (1.03) |
| | High proportion of double | 3.6 (1.52) | 3.03 (1.5) | 2.46 (1.24) | 2.33 (1.18) |
| Punishment | Low proportion of double | 1.73 (3.94) | 1.48 (2.73) | 1.33 (2.61) | 1.35 (2.66) |
| | High proportion of double | 4.14 (3.94) | 4.86 (3.91) | 5.81 (3.98) | 6.75 (3.68) |
| Whistle-blow | Low proportion of double | 2.52 (1.88) | 2.29 (1.8) | 2.32 (1.7) | 2.32 (1.82) |
| | High proportion of double | 3.75 (2.04) | 4.11 (2.14) | 4.79 (2.11) | 5.01 (2) |

*Note*. Punishment in the group condition is per group member.

### 4.1.3 | Mediation analysis

To determine if the relationships between the target of judgment and punishment or whistle-blowing intentions were mediated by the suspicion of the target (when the report contained a high proportion of doubles and was therefore likely to be dishonest), we used the PROCESS macro with the target as a multicategorical independent variable (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). Because the group and the individual conditions produce similar results, the data were collapsed between these conditions. Two dummies were created for Group Members A and B, and the reference category was the collapsed Group and Individual conditions.

As can be seen in Figure 4, the regression coefficients between the targets and suspicion were significant, as well as between the targets and the willingness to punish the participants and whistle-blow on them. The effect of the target on the punishment inflicted was reduced into nonsignificance after the suspicion in the target was included in the model. The bootstrapped relative indirect effect was significant for the contrast between Group Member A and the Individual/Group conditions (Effect = −1.73, *SE* = 0.29, 95% confidence interval [CI] = −2.35, −1.23) and for the contrast between Group Member B and the Individual/Group conditions (Effect = −0.8, *SE* = 0.23, 95% CI = −1.29, −0.4). Thus, the effect of the target

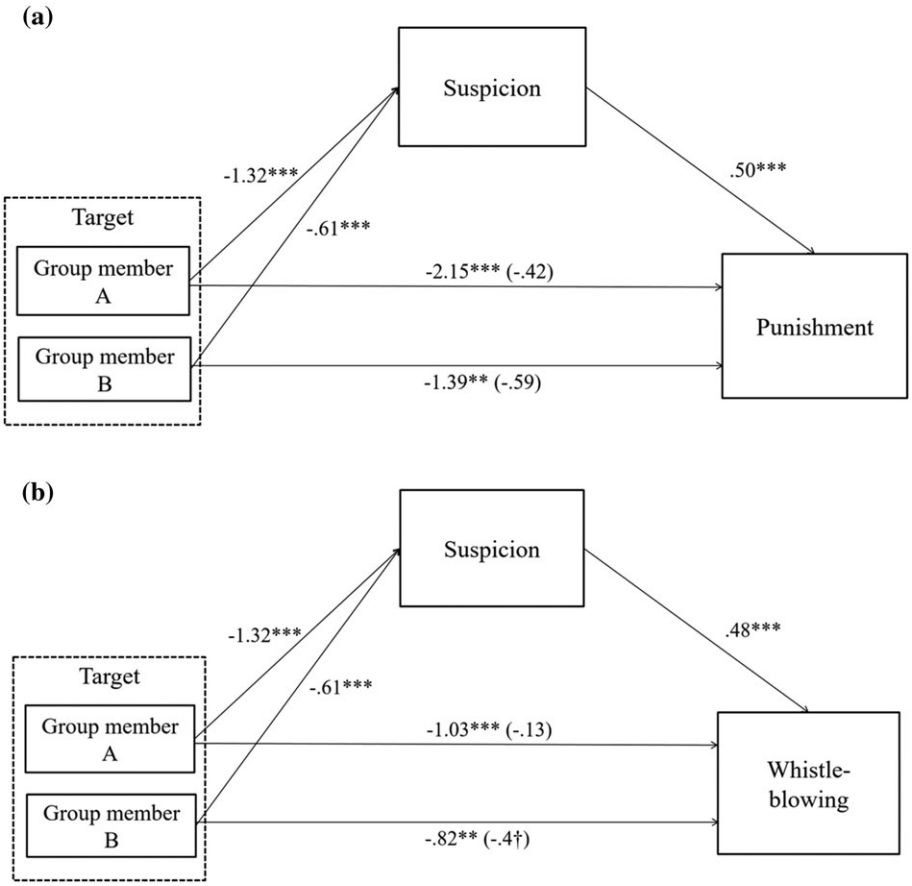


**FIGURE 4** Experiment 3a: The effect of target on (a) inflicted punishment and (b) whistle-blowing intentions (willingness to report the dishonest behavior), as mediated by suspicion of the target. The mediation analysis was performed when the target reported a high proportion of doubles. The reference category is the group and individual condition combined

of judgment on the punishment is mediated by the suspicion of the target.

The effect of the target on whistle-blowing intentions was reduced into nonsignificance after the mediator was included in the model for Group Member A, and to marginal significance for Group Member B. The bootstrapped relative indirect effect was significant for both targets (Group Member A: Effect = −0.9, *SE* = 0.15, 95% CI = −1.23, −0.63; Group Member B: Effect = −0.42, *SE* = 0.12, 95% CI = −0.68, −0.19). Therefore, the effect of the target of evaluation on the whistle-blowing intentions was also mediated by the level of suspicion of the target.

## 4.2 | Experiment 3b

### 4.2.1 | Method

#### Participants and procedure

One hundred and seventy-five participants filled out an online survey on mTurk. Twenty-four participants were excluded from the analysis because they failed to answer correctly at least one of the reading comprehension checks, and four participants were excluded because they failed to answer an attentiveness check (same as Experiment 3a). Therefore, 147 participants were left for the analysis.

Participants read about the coin-toss task as in Experiments 1, 2, and 3a and had to judge one of three targets: (a) a group of two players, (b) the first player in a group (i.e., Group Member A), or (c) the second player in a group (i.e., Group Member B). The individual condition was dropped in the current experiment because it was not found to differ from the group in any of the previous experiments and because the reported outcomes in this experiment would not make sense for an individual player (see below). Each participant evaluated the outcomes of three blocks of eight coin-toss trials. The blocks differed with respect to the number of heads reported by Player A, which was 2 (*low*), 6 (*medium*), or 8 (*high*). Player B—in all blocks—always matched Player A's reports, so there are always eight doubles in a block. Note that when Player A reports heads twice only, Player B is reasonably suspicious of dishonesty, because Player A reports the favorable outcome (heads) less than the number of times predicted by chance.

The order of the three blocks was counterbalanced between participants. As in Experiment 3a, after every set of outcomes, participants were asked to express their suspicion by evaluating the target's dishonesty ($\alpha$'s > = 0.9), the perceived legitimacy of the acts ($\alpha$'s > = 0.87), their willingness to report their suspicion of the target(s), and their willingness to punish them.

### 4.2.2 | Results

We found that the order of blocks presented to the participants significantly affected the results and interacted with the proportion of double heads variable (see Data S1 for detailed analysis). Therefore, only the first block that each participant observed was included in the main analyses, resulting in a three-by-three between-subjects design. Scores of each dependent variable were administered separately to an ANOVA with target (Group Member A; Group Member B; group) and the number of heads reported by Group Member A (2; 6; 8) as between-subject independent variables.

A main effect was found for the number of heads reported by Group Member A on suspicion, perceived legitimacy, and whistle-blowing, $F(2, 138) = 10.64$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.13$; $F(2, 138) = 5.12$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$; $F(2, 138) = 3.22$, $p = 0.043$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$, respectively. Simple effects analysis shows that participants believed the behavior was significantly more suspicious, less legitimate, and that they were more likely to report it, when Group Member A reported heads eight times, compared with two times (all $p$'s < 0.05), and marginally significantly compared with six times (all $p$'s < 0.09). A marginally significant interaction emerged between the target and the number of heads reported by Player A on suspicion, $F(4, 138) = 2.38$, $p = 0.055$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$. A simple effects analysis shows that when Group Member A reported two or six heads, she was suspected less than Group Member B and the group (all $p$'s < 0.06; see Table 4). A significant main effect was also found for target of evaluation on the suspicion and perceived legitimacy, $F(2, 138) = 3.13$, $p = 0.047$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$; $F(2, 138) = 2.64$, $p = 0.075$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$, respectively, but simple contrasts analyses showed that no two groups significantly differed from each other (all $p$'s > 0.3).

No other main effects were found for the target of evaluation, and there were no interaction effects (all $p$'s > 0.2). Additionally, the target of evaluation and the number of reported heads did not influence the punishment inflicted on the participants, $F(2, 138) = 1.24$, $p = 0.29$; $F(2, 138) = 1.39$, $p = 0.29$, respectively.

## 4.3 | Meta-analysis—experiments 2, 3a, and 3b

To better understand the diffusion of blame effect, we conducted a meta-analysis including Experiments 2, 3a, and 3b, examining the difference in judgment between Group Member B and the Group (when the reported outcomes were six double "heads" and two double "tails," a combination that is common to all three experiments). Three hundred and twenty-four participants were included in the meta-analysis (Experiment 2 $n$ = 106; Experiment 3a $n$ = 184; Experiment 3b $n$ = 34; note that participants who evaluated Group Member A or an individual were not included). Experiment 1 was not included in

**TABLE 4** Experiment 3b: descriptive statistics

| | Reported heads by group member Amber A | Player A *M* (*SD*) | Player B *M* (*SD*) | Group *M* (*SD*) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Suspicion | 2 | 3.13 (1.62) | 4.26 (2.25) | 4.31 (1.71) |
| | 6 | 3.65 (1.87) | 5.25 (1.18) | 5.3 (1.57) |
| | 8 | 5.81 (1.98) | 5.58 (1.72) | 5.1 (2.38) |
| Legitimacy | 2 | 4.85 (1.57) | 3.9 (1.85) | 3.76 (1.82) |
| | 6 | 4.55 (1.76) | 3.33 (1.46) | 3.5 (1.51) |
| | 8 | 3.04 (1.55) | 2.92 (1.35) | 3.29 (2.29) |
| Punishment | 2 | 2.53 (3.34) | 4.44 (4.03) | 3.57 (3.78) |
| | 6 | 3.7 (3.68) | 5 (3.88) | 5.14 (4.47) |
| | 8 | 5.3 (3.38) | 5.75 (4.45) | 3.1 (4.23) |
| Whistle-blow | 2 | 2.8 (2.11) | 3.83 (2.11) | 2.83 (2.04) |
| | 6 | 3.6 (2.22) | 4.2 (2.28) | 4 (2.45) |
| | 8 | 4.11 (2.33) | 4.58 (1.88) | 4.23 (2.62) |

*Note*. Punishment in the group condition is per group member.

the meta-analysis because it did not contain the relevant set of conditions for examining the difference between the group and Group Member B and because it used different measures from Experiments 2 and 3.[3] Experiment 4 presented hereinafter is also not included in the meta-analysis as it focuses on the comparison between the judgment of individuals and groups and utilizes a different set of conditions than the previous experiments. We used the Exploratory Software for confidence intervals (Cumming, 2013). As there was no heterogeneity between studies, we used a fixed effects model.

The results of the meta-analysis confirmed that Group Member B was judged as less responsible and was punished to a lesser extent than each group member when evaluated together. Overall, the Group was suspected more than Group Member B (mean difference between Group Member B and the Group was 0.586, *SD* = 0.15, 95% CI = [0.30, 0.88]), the behavior of Group Member B was perceived as more legitimate than the Group's behavior ($Mean_{diff}$ = −0.548, *SD* = 0.18, 95% CI = [−0.96, −0.19]), and participants were more willing to inflict punishment on each member of the group when evaluated together than on Player B ($Mean_{diff}$ = 1.54, *SD* = 0.44, 95% CI = [0.70, 2.39]).

## 4.4 | DISCUSSION

Overall, the combined results from Experiments 2, 3a, and 3b show that the group is suspected more than Group Member B. Experiment 2 and Experiment 3a show that the group is suspected to the same extent as an individual, and both are suspected more than each group member separately. Experiment 3a also shows that participants punished the different targets according to their suspicion of them (with the exception that both group members were punished to the same extent, whereas Group Member A was suspected of lying less than Group Member B). Suspicion also mediates the willingness to report players' misconduct to the experimenter. Suspicion is, thus, translated into corresponding actions.

Experiment 3a shows that targets' past behavior influences the judgment of all types of targets in the same direction; previous honest behavior led to more suspicion and less perceived legitimacy of subsequent actions.

Experiment 3b further suggests that even when only one group member is responsible for the dishonest behavior, the group is blamed for this behavior at least to the extent as the responsible player. Not surprisingly, when Group Member A's reports were likely to be honest and Group Member B's reports were likely to be dishonest, only the latter was perceived as unethical. Also, when both group members are brazen liars, and responsible for the dishonest behavior to the same extent, it seems that there is no diffusion of blame. These findings suggest that when there is no ambiguity, and the outcomes clearly point to dishonest (or honest) behavior, people attribute the responsibility to the obvious suspects and thus the method by which the target is evaluated does not influence its judgment.

[3]Specifically, in Experiment 1, we measured perceived lying and honesty by using one item for each variable, whereas in Experiments 2 and 3, we measured dishonesty and legitimacy using multiple item scales, as well as punishment.

# 5 | EXPERIMENT 4

Although previous studies on ethical behavior have shown that groups are more likely to act dishonestly compared with individuals (e.g., Conrads et al., 2013; Kocher et al., 2017; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015), the findings from Experiments 1, 2, and 3a did not show any significant differences between the *evaluation* of groups and individuals. One possible limitation of the task used in our experiments is that the individual targets, who report 16 times, are in charge of more reported outcomes than Group Members A and B, who report only eight outcomes each. The fact that the same individual could lie about both the first and the second reported outcomes on each turn might have inflated the perceived suspiciousness of that individual, elevating it to the level of the group. On a similar note, in our setting, each member of the group had to report fewer coin tosses than the group as a unit. It might be possible that this difference enhanced the perception that group members' outcomes could be attributed to chance, whereas the group's (and individual's) outcomes to dishonesty.

The purpose of Experiment 4 is to address this limitation. In Experiment 4, the individual reports only eight outcomes, as each group member. Participants read that the individual partakes in the same task as in previous experiments, but the outcome of either the first or second coin toss is randomly generated by a computer, creating exactly the same set of results as the group condition.

If Experiment 4 shows that the individual is evaluated similarly to the group when the number of reported outcomes by the individual is identical to the number of reported outcomes by each group member, it will enable us to answer the suggested limitations. First, it will suggest that the lack of difference between the group and the individual is not due to the number of reported outcomes by the individual. Second, it will suggest that the difference between the evaluation of the group as a whole and each group member is not merely the product of the number of reported outcomes.

## 5.1 | Method

### 5.1.1 | Participants and procedure

A sample size of 630 participants was determined by a priori calculation by G-Power software (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996) of 80% power to detect a small effect. To aim for this number of valid participants, 707 participants completed an online survey distributed through mTurk. One hundred and one participants were excluded from the analysis because they failed to answer correctly at least one of the reading comprehension checks (see Data S1), which left 606 participants for the analysis.

Participants read about the coin-toss task as in the previous experiments, with a minor change. In the individual condition, the individual took the position of either Player A or Player B, and a computer participated as the other player. In the Individual-A condition, the individual reported the outcome of a coin toss, followed by another outcome generated randomly by the computer. In the Individual-B condition, a computer first reported a randomly generated outcome, and then the person had to report the outcome of the second coin toss. The monetary profit is determined by the reported outcome of the individual and the computer (for the full scenario, see Data S1).

Participants had to judge one of three targets: (a) a group of two participants, (b) an individual playing as the first player in a group (Individual A), and (c) an individual playing as the second player in a group (Individual B). Each participant evaluated the outcomes of two blocks of eight coin-toss trials; one in which the targets reported a low proportion of doubles (50%), and one in which they reported a high proportion of doubles (75%; five double heads and one double tails). The order of the two blocks was counterbalanced between participants.

After each block, participants were asked to express their suspicion by evaluating the target's dishonesty using four statements as in Experiment 3b ($\alpha$'s > = 0.85; unless stated otherwise, all measures were presented on a scale of 1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*very much*]) and the perceived legitimacy of the acts using four statements ($\alpha$'s > = 0.81). Additionally, participants stated their willingness to report suspicious outcomes to the experimenter. Finally, participants expressed their willingness to punish the target by deducting money from the individual's or from each group member's profits (between $0 and $10).

### 5.2 | Results and discussion

Scores of each dependent variable were administered separately to a repeated measures ANOVA with target (group; Individual A; Individual B) as between-subjects variable and the proportion of doubles (high; low) as a within-subjects variable.

A main effect for the proportion of reported doubles was found on suspicion, legitimacy, punishment, and whistle-blowing, $F(1, 603) = 856.8$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.59$; $F(1, 603) = 742.28$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.55$; $F(1, 603) = 368.53$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.38$; $F(1, 603) = 363.1$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.38$, respectively. Participants evaluated the high proportion of doubles as more suspicious and less legitimate and were more likely to report and to punish such behavior ($M_{Suspicion} = 4.52$, $SD_{Suspicion} = 1.63$; $M_{Legitimate} = 3.81$, $SD_{Legitimate} = 1.57$; $M_{Punish} = 3.69$, $SD_{Punish} = 3.7$; $M_{Whistle\text{-}blow} = 3.9$, $SD_{Whistle\text{-}blow} = 2.01$) than the low proportion of doubles ($M_{Suspicion} = 2.17$, $SD_{Suspicion} = 1.14$; $M_{SLegitimate} = 5.88$, $SD_{Legitimate} = 1.07$; $M_{Punish} = 1.05$, $SD_{Punish} = 2.21$; $M_{Whistle\text{-}blow} = 2.35$, $SD_{Whistle\text{-}blow} = 1.88$). No main effect was found for the target of evaluation on suspicion, legitimacy, punishment, or whistle-blowing, $F(2, 603) = 0.73$, $p = 0.481$; $F(2, 603) = 0.54$, $p = 0.586$; $F(2, 603) = 1.31$, $p = 0.269$; $F(2, 603) = 0.01$, $p = 0.994$, respectively; see Table 5.

We found a significant interaction between the target of judgement and the proportion of reported doubles on ratings of suspicion, legitimacy, punishment, and whistle-blowing, $F(2, 603) = 3.93$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$; $F(2, 603) = 3.66$, $p = 0.026$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$; $F(2, 603) = 5.3$, $p = 0.005$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$; $F(2, 603) = 6.25$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. However, simple effects analyses yielded only a few significant differences between the targets of judgment in both levels of reported outcomes. When the proportion of reported doubles was low, Individual A was suspected more than the group ($p = 0.007$). In addition, Individual A was punished to a lesser extent compared with each group member when evaluated together as a group ($p = 0.012$) and Individual B ($p = 0.078$). No other simple effects were found.

The results replicate the findings from Experiments 1, 2, and 3a. There was no consistent difference between individuals and groups in the suspicion and legitimacy evaluation, the willingness to report, and in the punishment inflicted upon them. In addition, the role that individual players took—first player or second player—did not affect their evaluation. Thus, the results rule out a possible explanation for the similar evaluation of groups and individuals, according to which the individual player in our setting received inflated dishonesty and illegitimacy ratings due to the larger number of reported outcomes compared with each group member. According to Experiment 4, even when the individual player reports only eight outcomes (instead of 16 as in previous experiments), as each group member does, she is believed to be as dishonest as the group. Therefore, it is unlikely that the number of reported outcome by the individual in Experiments 1–3 explain the similar ratings of the individual and the group. Similarly, because reporting eight outcomes out of 16 does not reduce the evaluation of dishonesty and legitimacy, it cannot explain the higher blame assigned to the group compared with the group members in Experiments 2–3.

## 6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In four experiments, we find that the target of evaluation influences the way people perceive, and act upon, suspiciously successful behavior. People believe groups to be as dishonest as individuals when behaving suspiciously. However, they are less likely to perceive single group members as dishonest and to report their suspicious behavior, compared with the group as a unit or with an individual acting alone. The increased perceived dishonesty also led to a greater willingness to engage in punitive actions by subtracting money from the dishonest players. People also differentiated between the group members: The

**TABLE 5** Experiment 4: descriptive statistics

| | | Individual A | Individual B | Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Reported doubles | *M* (*SD*) | *M* (*SD*) | *M* (*SD*) |
| Suspicion | Low proportion of double | 2.32 (1.18) | 2.17 (1.19) | 2.01 (1.03) |
| | High proportion of double | 4.36 (1.59) | 4.65 (1.6) | 4.57 (1.69) |
| Legitimacy | Low proportion of double | 5.76 (1.11) | 5.91 (1.11) | 5.98 (.99) |
| | High proportion of double | 3.98 (1.57) | 3.68 (1.54) | 3.78 (1.59) |
| Punishment | Low proportion of double | 1.14 (2.31) | .98 (2.18) | 1.02 (2.14) |
| | High proportion of double | 3.17 (3.6) | 3.82 (3.76) | 4.1 (3.69) |
| Whistle-blow | Low proportion of double | 2.54 (1.95) | 2.25 (1.78) | 2.24 (1.89) |
| | High proportion of double | 3.69 (2.06) | 3.98 (1.92) | 4.03 (2.01) |

first player who "sets the stage" was judged as less dishonest than the second player who "gets the job done."

Our judgment of other people's immoral actions is flexible and affected by many factors. Perceived control over the actions (Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003), knowledge about the actions' outcomes (Gino, Moore, & Bazerman, 2009), the subjects of judgment (Haidt & Baron, 1996), and the person's motivation (Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, & Trafimow, 2002; Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2009) were all found to influence the way people judge other's behavior. On the other hand, people tend to discard important aspects such as situational factors (Reeder & Spores, 1983). Our findings reveal an additional bias in moral judgment: People tend to lessen the negative moral character they attribute to an individual for unethical behavior when it is conducted in collaboration with another person. The focus on moral judgment of groups is particularly important as there is a growing body of literature examining cheating in groups (e.g., Cohen et al., 2009; Conrads et al., 2013; Gino et al., 2013; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015; Wiltermuth, 2011), but hardly any research investigating how groups are judged when behaving unethically.

The reduced negative judgment of each group member can be explained by the diffusion of responsibility phenomenon (Bandura et al., 1996; Bickman, 1972; Conrads et al., 2013; Darley & Latané, 1968), whereby each group member feels less responsible for the outcomes of their group's behavior and decisions. We found evidence that diffusion of responsibility also takes place in the judgment of group members: People diffuse blame between others who behave dishonestly and believe them to be more honest when behaving suspiciously, compared with people working alone. Our findings of decreased negative moral judgment for separate group members can also be explained by the prosocial component of their dishonest behavior (Gino & Pierce, 2009; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015). Unlike the individual or the group, when judging a single group member, it is obvious that this group member is not the sole beneficiary of her lies. When examining the group level, there is only one unit that gains from the lie—the group. We believe that these two mechanisms of diffused responsibility and justifiability of lies are at work when judging individual group members as compared with a group as a unit, leading to an overall diffusion of blame.

However, Experiment 3b shows that the diffusion of blame does have boundaries. When both group members were brazen liars, reporting only the most profitable outcome, it was no longer the case that people attribute less immoral character to each group member when judged separately compared with judging a brazen individual or group. Possibly, when there is (nearly) no ambiguity at all about all group members' dishonest behavior, people perceive them as fully responsible for their behavior and do not diffuse the blame between them.

Our results show that people assign less blame to Group Member A than to Group Member B. This finding is likely a result of the sequential task's settings, in which the first player is responsible for "setting the stage" for gaining the highest profits from the task and the second player is responsible for "getting the job done" and determining whether the group would actually gain any profits from the task. Although both group members report the same outcomes, and both are likely to lie to the same extent (Gross et al., forthcoming; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015), the second player seems to be perceived as having more power over the profits. This pattern was not observed for the judgment of individuals participating in the task with a computer: In Experiment 4, individuals were judged similarly when taking the part of either the first or the second player.

Future studies can examine what else can reduce the bias caused by the diffusion of blame. For example, it is possible that experts, who are accustomed to judging moral issues, would be less inclined to diffuse negative moral judgment. Research can also examine whether rewarding for accurate decision making would reduce the diffusion of moral judgment, by increasing the motivation to consider the situation objectively. Future research can also investigate whether the diffusion of moral judgment also occurs for individuals and groups that are emotionally relevant, such as groups of friends or hated outgroups. In the current work, the individuals and groups were neutral and unidentified, so there was no reason to perceive them, a priori, as particularly blameworthy or not. When targets are identified, there would possibly be a motivation to blame each group member to the full extent and not diffuse the blame. For example, people might not diffuse blame among supporters of an opposing political party, or fans of a rival soccer team. In addition, such groups are more readily classified as an entity—a unit of people with stable properties—and therefore the group's behavior is more likely to project on its members' traits (Dasgupta et al., 1999; Menon et al., 1999; Newheiser et al., 2012; Weisel & Böhm, 2015).

Another future direction can address the level of information given to the participants. According to the unpacking effect in evaluative judgments, categories or events produce more extreme evaluations when they have more detailed descriptions (unpacking) than the same categories or events with less detailed descriptions (packing; Tversky & Koehler, 1994; Van Boven & Epley, 2003). Thus, when evaluating a group while the contribution of each group member is not clear, people overestimate their own responsibility for the group's outcomes. However, when the contribution of each group member is salient, this effect does not take place (e.g., Savitsky, Van Boven, Epley, & Wight, 2005). In our studies, even when judging the group as one unit, both group members' actions are described in detail, and it is clear that both take part in the task and are responsible for the outcomes. Thus, it is possible that if people would be aware only to the suspiciously success of the group, but not to each group members' contribution, the effect would reverse, and each group member would be perceived as more suspicious and responsible for the outcomes. Because in many cases, people do not possess full information about individual contribution in group tasks, this should be an important avenue of research.

Lastly, participants in the current research were exposed to *scenarios* depicting suspicious behavior of individuals and groups. To improve ecological validity, future research could examine the reported phenomenon using more realistic settings as stimuli.

### 6.1 | Judging groups and individuals

Previous studies have shown that people lie more when others can also profit from their misconduct or when the unethical behavior is conducted with another person (e.g., Cohen et al., 2009; Conrads

et al., 2013; Gino et al., 2013; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015). Therefore, we predicted that following exposure to apparent dishonest behavior, people would be more suspicious of groups than of individuals. However, in all four experiments, we found no differences in the suspicion, judgment, or punishment directed towards individuals and groups, and there was also no difference in whistle-blowing rates in Experiments 3 and 4.[4] In Experiments 2 and 3, we found that when each member of a group is evaluated separately, evaluations are more lenient than those directed at the group as a whole.

A possible limitation of the latter result is that each group is responsible for more reports (16) than each group member (who is responsible for only eight reports; in Experiments 1–3). This difference might explain the harsher evaluation of groups relative to group members. The results of Experiment 4, however, show that the number of reports a target is responsible for—eight or 16—is not crucial for the evaluation of the target, as individuals who were responsible for only eight reports were evaluated similarly to groups who were responsible for 16 reports, replicating the results from Experiments 1–3 (where both targets were responsible for 16 reports and also evaluated similarly).

Analysis of the punishment item in Experiments 2 and 3 provides another indication that the number of reports the target is responsible for is not crucial in explaining the more lenient evaluation of separate group members as compared with the group as a whole. In the group condition, the punishment item measures the amount of punishment that is inflicted on each member of the group. Because each member of the group is responsible for eight reports, as are Player A and Player B, the number of reports the target is responsible for cannot explain the differences in the amount of punishment inflicted on the target. Still, when each group member was evaluated separately, there was less punishment inflicted—per person—than when the group was evaluated as a single unit. In Experiment 2, for example, each member of a suspiciously successful group judged as one unit was punished by $5.80 on average (total of $11.6 for both members), whereas the average punishment inflicted on each group member when judged separately was only $4.00 (total of $8 for both members). Being judged separately saved each group member $1.80.

The question remains: Why do people neglect the increased lying in groups compared with individuals when evaluating suspicious behavior? A possible answer is that people simply do not understand that groups lie more. Furthermore, sometimes it is believed that "four eyes are better than two" and that people would be less willing to lie when they are in the company of others. Future studies can examine what is the reason for this finding, for example, by informing participants that groups tend to lie more than individuals, before asking them to evaluate suspicious reported outcomes.

[4]It could be that there is a difference in the evaluation of groups and individuals but that the effect was not captured by our Experiments (1–4). We conducted post hoc power analyses (with G*Power; Erdfelder et al., 1996) that revealed that the probability to detect a medium effect size ($d$ = 0.50; Cohen, 1992) when comparing the group and individual conditions when a high proportion of doubles is reported, was 0.79 in Experiment 1, 0.86 in Experiment 2, and 0.97 in Experiment 3a. Therefore, we can conclude that if there is any effect when comparing groups and individuals, it is likely to be small and that people indeed do not, or hardly, consider the elevated proportions of lying in groups, when evaluating misconduct.

Relatedly, in the current research, we focus on dyads, the smallest type of group. We believe that for the case of this research, a dyad should elicit the same responses as larger groups, as the scenario involves a collaborative task that does not include any verbal communication. However, future research could examine whether the diffusion of moral judgment, as well as the similar evaluation of groups and individuals, remains the same also when evaluating larger groups.

### 6.2 | The effect of past behavior

Another intriguing finding is that people judge unethical behavior more harshly when they first observe honest behavior from the same individual or group (Experiment 3a). People found disproportionate highly profitable outcomes as more suspicious and less legitimate, and they were more willing to report them, when they were observed after a set of plausibly honest outcomes. It did not matter whether the target was a group or an individual; in both cases, unethical behavior was perceived as less ethical following honest behavior.

This finding is contrary to previous research, showing that people are more willing to accept unethical behavior when it follows previous honest behavior (Merritt et al., 2010). The explanation is perhaps that in our setting (Experiment 3a), the change in behavior—from apparently honest to apparently dishonest—was abrupt rather than gradual (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). The extreme sharp shift might enable people to easily identify the gap between the block containing the high proportion of doubles and the block containing the low proportion of doubles. Specifically, people might find it easier to identify that the block containing a low proportion of doubles should be attributed to honest reporting after observing brazen lying, and therefore judge it as less suspicious, and that a block containing only doubles is dishonest, after observing a block with 50% doubles.

## 7 | CONCLUSIONS

Although groups are more susceptible to ethical violations than individuals, people do not seem to take this tendency into account when judging others and do not suspect groups to act less honestly than individuals. In fact, individual group members are judged as *more* honest than individuals and groups and are less likely to be punished for their behavior. Thus, it can be easier for people to avoid punishment for misconduct when working with others, as long as they are judged separately. This finding is troubling because in many cases, although unethical behavior is conducted by a group, each group member is, in fact, judged separately and faces the consequences alone. Therefore, it is imperative that people are aware of this bias when judging unethical behavior. Organizations seeking to increase honesty in their midst should take this bias into account when considering suspicious behavior of teams, for example, by evaluating the behavior of all team members simultaneously.

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## ORCID

*Sigal Vainapel* http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6541-8115
*Ori Weisel* http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9304-2303
*Ro'i Zultan* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4256-8601
*Shaul Shalvi* http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2225-7352

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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