

# You don't deserve my honesty! The way individuals obtain their social status influences moral behaviour towards them.

Valerio Placidi<sup>1,3,4</sup>, Sarah Boukarras<sup>1,2</sup>, Michael Schepisi<sup>2,3</sup>, Vanessa Era<sup>1,2</sup>, Maria Serena Panasiti<sup>1,2</sup>, Matteo Candidi<sup>1,2</sup>

1. Department of Psychology, Sapienza University, Rome, Italy; 2. IRCCS Santa Lucia Foundation, Rome, Italy;

3. Sapienza University of Rome and CLN2S@Sapienza, Italian Institute of Technology, Rome, Italy;

4. International School of Advanced Studies, Department of Experimental Medicine and Public Health, University of Camerino, Camerino, Italy;

## Introduction

Previous research indicates that multiple personal and contextual variables can influence an individual's propensity to lie to someone else to obtain a reward. Nevertheless, the role of social status (i.e., the relative position of an individual along a social dimension within a given social hierarchy; Mattan et al., 2017) is underexplored. Indeed, until now studies focussed mainly on the effects exerted by status level (high vs. low) on moral behaviour (e. g., Piff et al., 2012; Schepisi et al., 2020), but it remains unclear whether the way through which one achieves status determines other people's deceptive behaviour toward them.

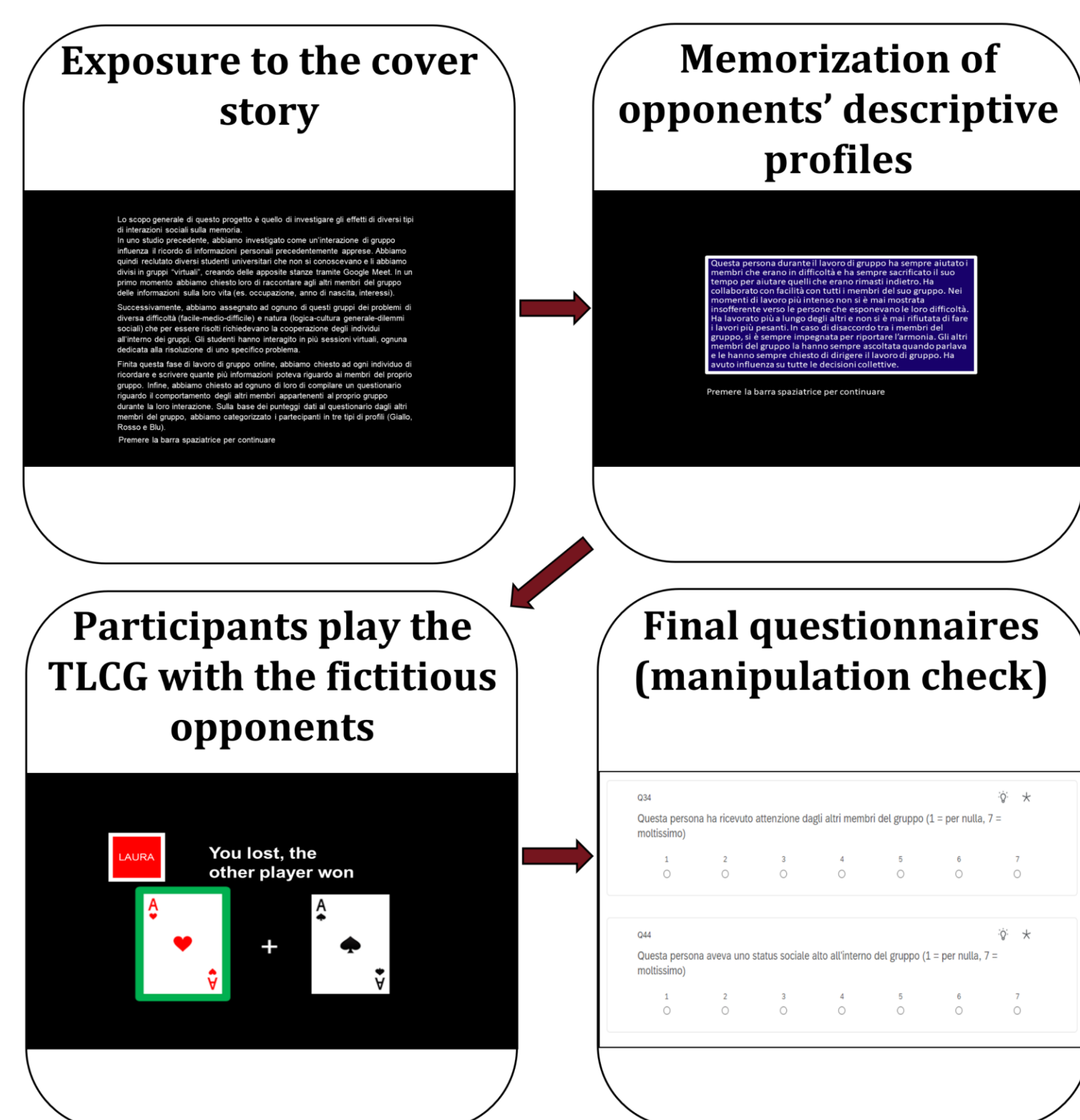
## Aim

Building on a recent model indicating that high social status can be acquired by displaying either dominance, competence or virtue (Bai, 2017), we designed an online study aimed at investigating whether the tendency to lie to someone is influenced by our previous knowledge of his/her status in a small group and by the strategy they used to gain such status.

## Methods

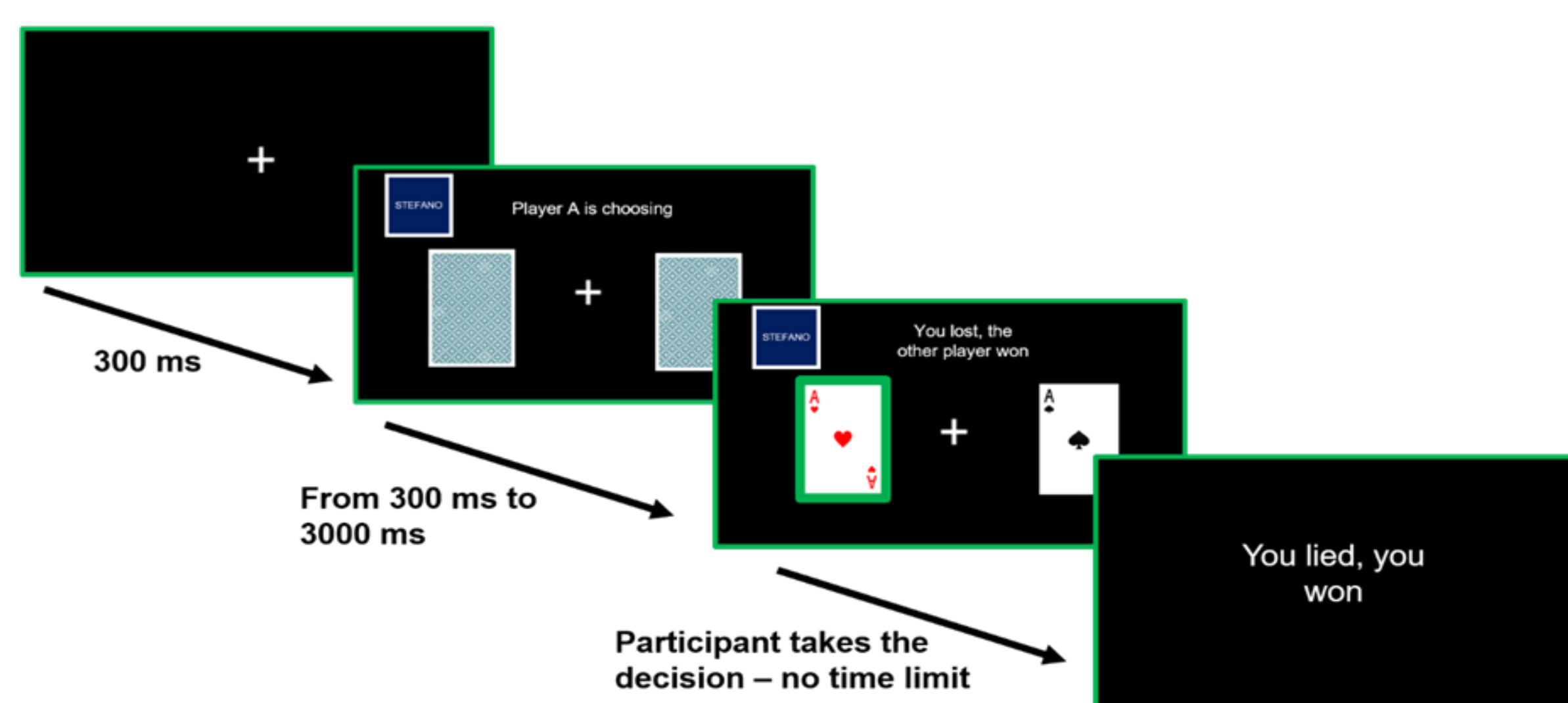
48 Italian participants (26 females) took part in a pilot study that was held online. The experimental procedure is shown in Fig.1.

**Fig.1** Graphic representation of the experimental procedure.



After reading the cover story and memorizing the personality profiles of the opponents, participants completed the *Temptation to Lie Card Game* (TLCG; Panasiti, Pavone, Merla & Aglioti, 2011), an economic interactive paradigm that in each trial offers to participants the choice to tell the truth or to lie to an opponent. Depending on the trial, the decision to lie can lead the participant to obtain a monetary reward for themselves (self-gain) or for the other (other-gain). Participants were led to believe that they were playing with 6 real people, who previously obtained high, middle or low status (manipulated within-subjects) by displaying either dominance, competence or virtue (manipulated between-subjects) in a group.

**Fig.2** Graphic representation of the timeline of a single trial in the TLCG.

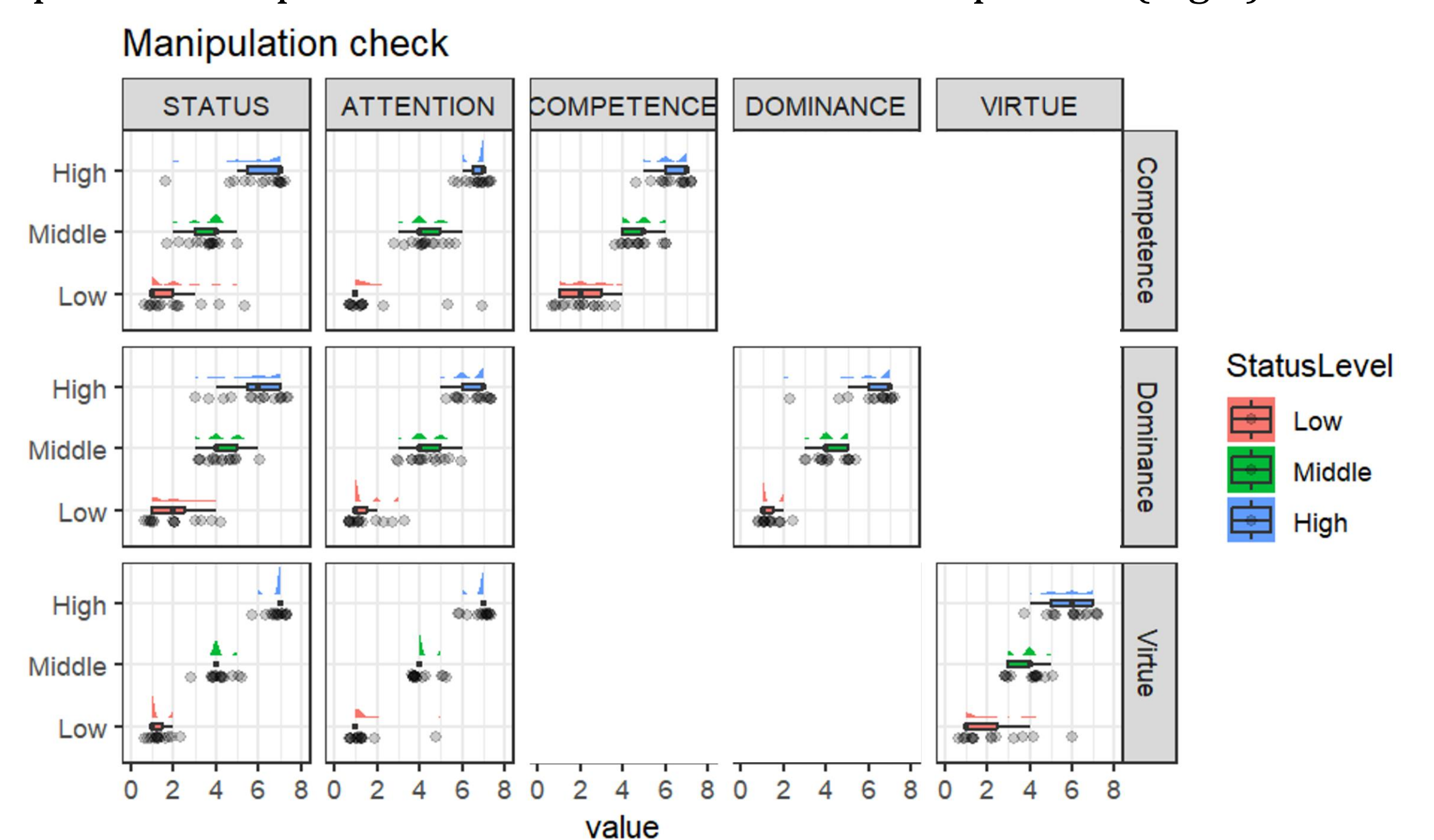


## Results

**Manipulation Check:** Participants attributed significantly higher scores of status and received attention to the profiles constructed to reflect high-status characteristics compared to the ones presenting middle or low-status characteristics. Moreover, higher scores of competence, dominance and virtue were respectively attributed to the high-status competent, dominant and virtuous profiles compared to the middle and low-status profiles (Fig.3).

**Fig.3**

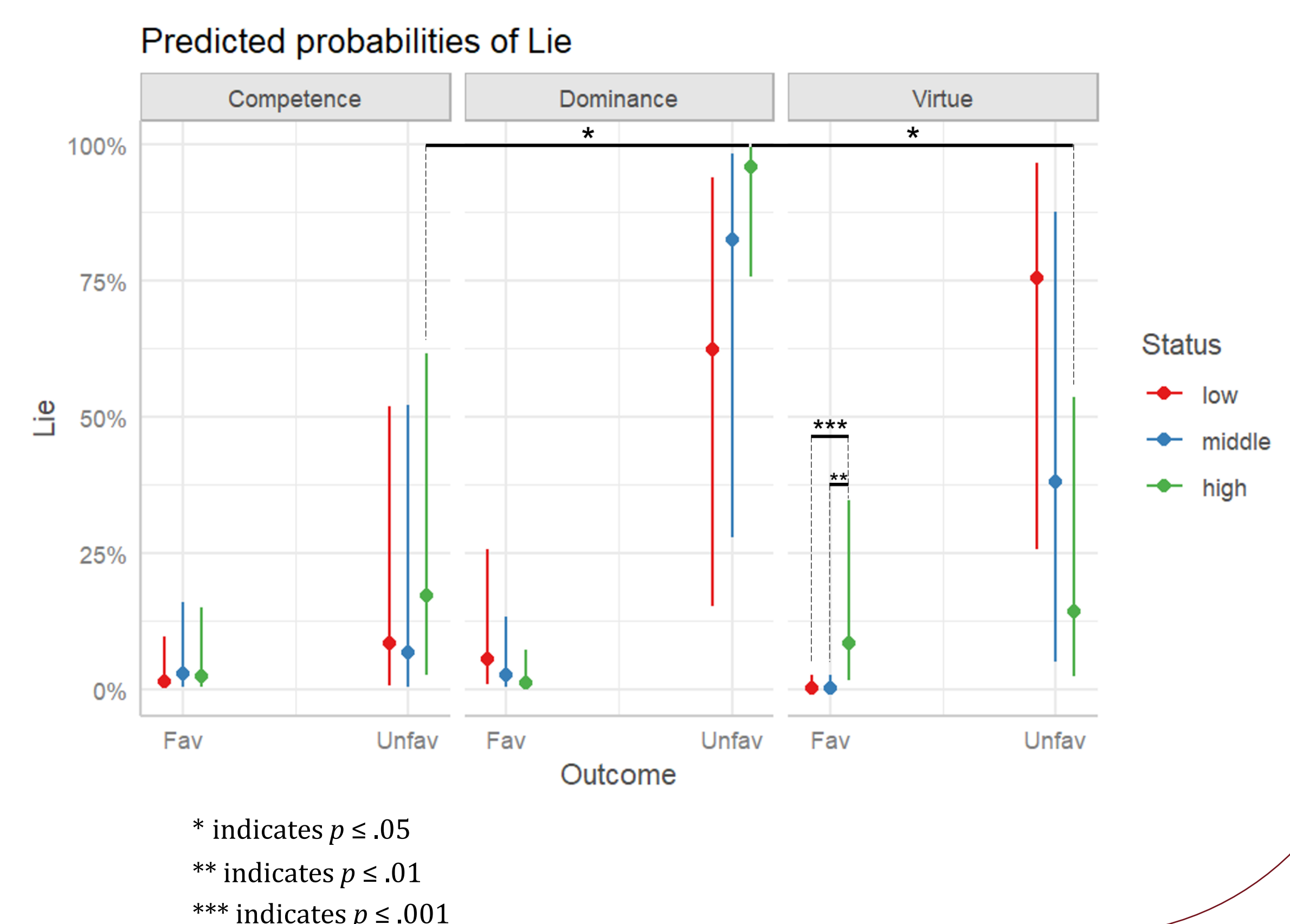
Results concerning the manipulation check. Data were analyzed through non-parametric ANOVA. The results indicate that the manipulation worked.



**TLCG Results:** The results indicate that participants produced more self-gain lies when interacting with a dominant high-status opponent compared to when they were interacting with competent ( $z = -3.16, p = .04$ ) or virtuous ( $z = 3.41, p = .02$ ) high-status opponents. In addition, participants produced more other-gain lies toward the virtuous high-status opponent compared to the virtuous middle ( $z = 3.73, p = .01$ ) and low-status ( $z = 4.12, p = .001$ ) opponents (Fig.4).

**Fig.4**

Results related to the TLCG. A multilevel mixed log-linear analysis, followed by post-hoc comparisons, was run to evaluate the presence of differences in the probability of lying between experimental conditions.



## Discussion

The results of the study suggest that both the social status of a target individual, and the way they used to obtain it, can indeed influence moral behaviour. More specifically, participants lied more to individuals who obtained high social status through dominance, compared to those who obtained it through competence or virtue. In addition, people appear to lie more to benefit highly virtuous individuals compared to individuals that show partial or low virtue. Our results have been used to generate and preregister a set of hypotheses that we are testing in a larger study.

**References:** Bai, 2017 (Personality and Social Psychology Review) Beyond dominance and competence: A moral virtue theory of status attainment; Mattan et al., 2017 (Perspectives on Psychological Science) How social status shapes person perception and evaluation: A social neuroscience perspective; Panasiti et al., 2011 (PloS one) Situational and dispositional determinants of intentional deceiving; Piff et al. 2012 (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences) Higher social class predicts increased unethical behavior; Schepisi et al., 2020 (Scientific reports) Oculomotor behavior tracks the effect of ideological priming on deception.