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Unearthing the Moral Emotive Compass: Exploring the Paths to (Un)Ethical Leadership

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General Discussion

Although the role of emotions in organizational life has long been neglected, these days emotions are argued to be an inseparable part of organizational life (cf. Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Zerbe, 2000) and to play a crucial role in shaping leader behavior. So far, most of the research focusing on the role of emotions in leadership processes seem to have focused on more general affective dimensions (e.g., positive affect; Rubin, Munz, & Bommer; 2005). However, to date, little is known about how discrete emotions – characterized by distinct appraisal patterns, subjective experiences, physiological reactions, expressions, and action tendencies (e.g., Van Kleef, Homan, & Cheshin, 2012) – impact leader behavior, and in particular (un)ethical leader behavior. Following several high profile ethical scandals, increased research attention has been devoted to studying antecedents of (un)ethical leadership but, so far, relatively few attempts were geared at testing the role of discrete (moral) emotions in shaping (un)ethical leader behavior.

The aim of this dissertation was to connect the literature on discrete emotions with the literature on (un)ethical leader behavior, and to provide more insight into discrete emotions as antecedents of (un)ethical leadership (Chapters 2, 3, and 4). In addition, we tested how anticipated feelings of guilt may help to explain follower reactions to (un)ethical leadership (Chapter 5).

Below, we will first summarize the main findings of our empirical chapters. Then, we will discuss the implications of our findings for the study of leader and follower behaviors in general and (un)ethical and deviant behaviors in particular. Furthermore, we will highlight some potentially fruitful directions for future research and outline the practical implications of our research. After discussing the strengths and limitations of our research, we will end with a general conclusive statement.

Summary of the Main Findings

Chapter 2. In Chapter 2, we hypothesized that authentically proud leaders show higher levels of ethical behavior (e.g., keeping in mind followers' interests, being honest, and providing ethical leadership) than hubristically proud leaders when their moral identity is salient. Furthermore, we predicted that the motivation to act selflessly would mediate this relationship. Specifically, with higher levels of moral identity, authentically proud leaders would act more ethically than hubristically proud leaders via higher levels of a selfless motivation. As a first test of our hypotheses, we conducted an experiment (Study 2.1) in which we manipulated pride (authentic vs. hubristic), measured moral identity, and tested whether the interactive effects of pride and moral identity predicted the motivation to act selflessly, which, in turn, predicted the number of tickets participants awarded to their follower. The findings of this first study were in line with our hypotheses and were replicated in a second experiment (Study 2.2) in which we manipulated both pride and moral identity and tested their interactive effects on the motivation to act selflessly, which, in turn, predicted the number of fiches awarded to the follower and the honesty of the communication towards the follower. A field study (Study 2.3), in which we measured leaders' authentic and hubristic pride, their moral identity, and ethical leadership, corroborated that authentic pride was positively associated with the display of ethical leadership when leaders' moral identity was high. Moreover, we found that hubristic pride was negatively associated with the display of ethical leadership for leaders with a high moral identity.

Chapter 3. In Chapter 3, we built further on the notion that leaders' moral identity represents an important factor that may help leaders to regulate their (un)ethical behavior. Yet, we extended the findings of Chapter 2 by demonstrating that moral identity's functioning may be weakened by feelings of contempt. In order to do so, we first had to develop a measure of contempt because multiple-item measures of contempt are lacking in the extant literature. To this end, we tested a self-developed measure of contempt in a sample of organizational leaders (Study 3.1) and

cross-validated the measure in a sample of undergraduate students. The pattern of results provided initial evidence for the convergent, nomological, and discriminant validity of the developed scale. Next, we tested the hypothesis that contempt moderates the relationship between moral identity and unethical supervisory behaviors, such that the stronger the contempt the weaker the negative relationship between moral identity and unethical supervisory behaviors. For a first test of this hypothesis, we gathered data from undergraduate students and measured their moral identity, tendency to experience contempt and probability of displaying unethical supervisory behaviors (Study 3.2). The findings of this study corroborated our hypothesis and were replicated in two samples of organizational leaders. These studies revealed that leaders' moral identity was strongly negatively related to their abusive supervision when their contempt was low (contempt was measured in Study 3.3, but manipulated in Study 3.4), whereas this negative relationship faded of when contempt was high.

Chapter 4. In Chapter 4, we further investigated the effects of leaders' contempt on their attitudes and behaviors vis-à-vis their employees. In addition, we argued that the effects of leader contempt are contingent on the amount of power a leader has. Previous research has demonstrated that power frees individuals from external constraints and rules, and increases alignment between internal traits and behavior (e.g., DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceranic, 2012). Based on these insights, we predicted that leaders' trait-like contempt is negatively associated with constructive attitudes and behaviors towards employees (i.e., people orientation, ethical leadership) whereas it is positively associated with destructive attitudes and behaviors vis-à-vis employees (i.e., dehumanization, self-serving behavior), particularly when leaders have higher levels of power rather than lower levels of power. In a first test of this hypothesis, we gathered multi-source data and demonstrated that leaders' self-reported trait-like contempt (measured with our self-developed scale) was negatively associated with their people orientation as rated by their employees, but

only when leaders' self-reported power was high rather than low (Study 4.1). These findings were replicated in a sample of subordinates, revealing that leaders' contempt was particularly strongly negatively associated with their people orientation as well as with their ethical leadership when the leader had higher (rather than lower) power (Study 4.2). We also showed in a sample of leaders that leader contempt was more strongly positively associated with their dehumanization as well as with their self-serving behavior at the expense of subordinates when the leader had higher power than when the leader had lower power (Study 4.3). Taken together, this set of studies shows that the powerful (in contrast to the powerless) act more in line with their contemptuous feelings.

Chapter 5. In Chapter 5, we aimed to explain why employees deviate against abusive supervisors but not against ethical supervisors from an anticipated emotions perspective. Specifically, we experimentally tested the hypothesis that employees of abusive supervisors as compared with employees of ethical supervisors are less likely to anticipate feeling guilty about deviating against their supervisor, and, consequently, demonstrate higher levels of deviant behavior. We first showed that an abusive supervision style elicited lower levels of anticipated guilt in employees than a neutral supervision style and an ethical supervision style (Study 5.1a). We then demonstrated that participants who were asked to write down reasons as to why they should not feel guilty about deviating against their leader were more likely to intentionally hurt their alleged supervisor by allocating a higher amount of hot sauce to the leader than those participants who were asked to write down reasons as to why they should feel guilty about deviating against their supervisor (Study 5.1b). In a different experiment we found that participants confronted with an abusive supervisor demonstrated lower task performance than participants confronted with an ethical supervisor via lower levels of anticipated guilt about obstructing their leader (Study 5.2). Furthermore, a field study replicated these findings by revealing that abusive supervision was positively associated with supervisor-directed deviance via lower levels of anticipated guilt, whereas

ethical leadership was negatively associated with supervisor-directed deviance via higher levels of anticipated guilt (Study 5.3). In sum, these studies provide first experimental evidence showing that a specific discrete emotion may play a substantial role in explaining why employees deviate against abusive supervisors but not against ethical supervisors.

Theoretical Implications and Directions for Future Research

The research reported in this dissertation centered on advancing our understanding of the role of emotions in predicting (un)ethical leadership as well as employee reactions to (un)ethical leadership. In doing so, we relied on several different theoretical underpinnings of the influence of discrete emotions and incorporated various theories that may help to explain *when* some emotions may affect leader (un)ethical behavior (e.g., theory on moral identity and power) and *why* specific emotions may play a role in the leader treatment-employee reaction link (e.g., social exchange theory). As such, we believe that our findings theoretically contribute to these streams of literature and may inform potentially fruitful directions for future research. Although specific theoretical implications and directions for future research are discussed in each individual paper, in this section, we will highlight some of the most important theoretical contributions of this dissertation.

First, this dissertation provides empirical evidence demonstrating the importance of an analysis of discrete emotions as antecedents of (un)ethical leader behavior. Discrete emotions arise from a unique constellation of appraisals of events (e.g., Van Kleef et al., 2012). As a consequence, the behaviors they elicit may vary substantially. Take, for example, contempt and guilt, both are negatively valenced, low activation emotions. Yet, the behaviors they elicit vary considerably. As we have demonstrated across the studies reported in the current dissertation, feelings of contempt (either trait-like or state-like) are associated with unfavorable or negative behavior towards others, whereas anticipated feelings of guilt withhold people from behaving destructively towards

others. Furthermore, we have shown that even two distinctive forms of the same emotion (i.e., pride) may differentially influence ethical behavior on the part of leaders. Building on these findings, we see promise for future research endeavors that aim to disentangle which discrete emotions motivate ethical behavior and which discrete emotions motivate unethical behavior. As a potential framework for studying the effects of discrete emotions, we argue that it may be valuable to not only take into account the valence of the emotion (e.g., positive versus negative), but to also consider the direction of the emotion (self-directed versus other-directed).

For instance, the general pattern that seems to emerge from our findings is that *negative other-directed* emotions can trigger unethical behaviors that may harm others, whereas (the anticipation of experiencing) *negative self-directed* emotions may withhold people from harming others. *Positive other-directed* emotions (e.g., gratitude and sympathy) may motivate ethical behavior vis-à-vis recipients of these emotions. *Positive self-directed* emotions (e.g., pride and happiness) may particularly motivate ethical behavior in an interpersonal context when it serves the function of receiving positive feedback for behaving ethically (e.g., Mascolo & Fischer, 1995; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Yet, in the case of hubristic pride the failure to take other individuals into account (i.e., egoism may foster self-serving behavior) may result in less ethical interpersonal behavior. Future research could be geared at testing the influence of all emotions that are part of a 2(valence) x 2(direction) framework and unraveling the conditions under which these emotions may drive unethical or ethical behavior.

On a related note, one should keep in mind that issues of morality and ethics are complicated and can oftentimes only be understood in view of the larger social context. For instance, feelings of gratitude or admiration for someone else may result in selfless and caring behavior vis-à-vis this person. This behavior could be viewed as prosocial behavior that is largely in line with ethical standards. However, the selfless and caring behavior towards such a person is often viewed differently if it is accompanied by bias

and discrimination towards others, as would be the case in dishonest helping behavior like cronyism and nepotism (cf. Gino & Pierce, 2009). These behaviors may be beneficial to the admired person but comes to the disadvantage of other people. Future research could be geared at testing whether the effects of discrete emotions differ depending on the type of (un)ethical behavior.

Furthermore, the studies presented in this dissertation focused on how experienced emotions or emotional traits influence (un)ethical behavior or deviant behavior of the person who is experiencing the emotion. However, emotions are not only intrapersonally experienced but also serve a communicative function. That is, emotional displays reveal information about the expresser's interpersonal intentions (cf. Van Kleef et al., 2012). For example, when a leader displays contempt this may signal to employees that they are held in low regard, and, may subsequently, influence employees' perceptions of their leaders' intentions and behavior. Future research could be dedicated to investigating how leader emotional displays affect for instance employee perceptions of (un)ethical leadership, and, subsequently, employee behavior.

Second, in two chapters (Chapter 2 and 3) we investigated the role of moral identity as antecedent of (un)ethical leader behavior and expanded upon extant findings by demonstrating that the salience of self-defining as a moral person may be tempered by certain emotions (i.e., contempt in this case). As the self-concept is a multidimensional construct and its influence depends upon its activation, previous research already alluded to the possibility that situational cues could impair moral identity's negative impact on unethical behavior via a decreased accessibility of one's moral identity (Aquino et al., 2009). We have extended this line of reasoning by demonstrating that not only situational cues can impair moral identity's activation and functioning, but that emotions that drive unethical behavior may operate in a similar fashion. Although we only tested the disrupting influence of contempt in this respect, future research has to explicate whether other emotions may also deactivate moral identity's function.

Third, in Chapter 4 we have demonstrated that power amplifies the negative association between contempt and both people orientation and ethical leadership and also strengthens the positive association between contempt and both dehumanization and self-serving behavior. As such, we were among the first to show that power's revealing function is not limited to situational, attitudinal and/or personality factors (e.g., Piteša & Thau, 2013) but can also generalize to more affective factors, such as contempt.

Fourth, in Chapter 5 we took a novel approach and focused on the influence of an anticipated emotion rather than on actually felt emotions or trait-like tendencies to experience particular emotions. We demonstrated that the anticipation of feeling guilty could withhold people from engaging in actions that may have resulted in actually feeling guilty. However, we did not test (1) whether those who did not engage in deviant behavior felt less guilty afterwards, and (2) whether the anticipated version of the emotion would more strongly influence behavior than the actually felt emotion. It would be interesting to further examine whether anticipated emotions may play a more powerful role in predicting (ethical) behavior than actually felt emotions or trait-like emotions.

Strengths and Limitations

This dissertation reports a total of fourteen empirical studies spread over four empirical chapters and attempted to provide more insight into the role of discrete emotions as well as the circumstances under which specific emotions may influence (un)ethical leadership and employee reactions to (un)ethical leadership. Of the studies, six are laboratory experiments and eight are organizational surveys. These methodologies suffer from their own drawbacks in terms of experimental control, generalizability, and validity. A major strength of laboratory experiments is the high internal validity; systematically manipulating the independent variables in a controlled setting makes it possible to infer causal paths (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). However, the high internal validity and experimental control oftentimes comes to the disadvantage of the external validity of the

findings. That is, laboratory experiments are often somewhat artificial in nature and may be criticized for being to a certain extent disconnected from reality (Colquitt, 2008), which makes it more difficult to generalize the findings to field settings. We aimed to allay these concerns by complementing our laboratory experiments with data derived from correlational field studies. Specifically, in each empirical chapter (except for Chapter 4) we replicated the findings from our experimental studies with at least one correlational field study. Although correlational field studies suffer from their own limitations as well – they are higher in external validity to the detriment of internal validity (i.e., their correlational nature does not allow for drawing causal conclusions) – we believe that the combination of experimental studies and correlational field studies bolsters the confidence in our findings by offsetting the weaknesses of one methodology with the strengths of the other. Furthermore, we replicated the findings not only across studies and methodologies, but also across samples (i.e., Dutch students, Dutch leaders and subordinates, and leaders and subordinates from the United States).

Although we believe that laboratory experiments and field studies may effectively complement each other, in the present dissertation we do not report longitudinal designs, cross-lagged panel designs or interventions. Longitudinal designs and cross-lagged panel designs would provide the advantage of collecting field data amongst ‘real’ leaders and employees while at the same time providing some tentative insight into the causal chain of events. Interventions could be extremely helpful in determining the effectiveness of the practical implications we have provided throughout this dissertation. Is training geared at reducing abusive supervision and improving ethical leadership an effective tool in reducing deviance on the part of employees? These types of questions could be addressed in future research by employing an interventional study.

Throughout this dissertation we have measured and manipulated various concepts. Where possible we relied on established and validated measures of our concepts or in our experimental studies on established

manipulations and procedures. For instance, to measure ethical leadership, abusive supervision, moral identity, power, and authentic and hubristic pride we used validated scales (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Tepper, 2000; Tracy & Robins, 2007; Yukl & Falbe, 1991). Also, to manipulate the activation of moral identity in the working self-concept we relied on a widely accepted manipulation and procedure (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007). Yet, sometimes existing measures and manipulations were not available, and, as a consequence, we had to employ novel measures and manipulations. Most notably, we developed a five-item measure to assess a tendency to experience feelings of contempt and tested its convergent, nomological, discriminant, and predictive validity. Furthermore, we developed manipulations for authentic and hubristic pride, contempt, anticipated guilt, ethical leadership, and abusive supervision. In doing so, we aimed to rely on proven procedures (e.g., a relived emotion task; Ekman, Levenson, & Friesen, 1983) and always administered manipulation checks in order to be able to test the effectiveness of the manipulation.

Unethical leader behavior can take various forms, including acting self-servingly to the detriment of others, abusing others, or engaging in fraud, nepotism, cronyism or other forms of unethical behavior. In this dissertation, we were not able to address all forms of unethical leader behavior. It has been argued that the balance between ethical and unethical conduct often reflects a tension between egocentrism and responsiveness to the needs and interests of others (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, & Milner, 2002). In line with this notion, our behavioral outcome measures were mostly based on paradigms in which the leader could choose to act self-servingly to the detriment of his/her subordinates. Yet, to make sure that this type of behavioral measure tapped into the construct we aimed to measure, we replicated the findings using established measures of self-reported ethical or abusive supervisory behaviors. Taken together, throughout the empirical chapters we used a combination of behavioral measures, which may be criticized for being

narrow in scope, and self-reports, which may be criticized for being subjective. We believe that these types of measures may fruitfully complement each other and that the replication of findings across various behavioral measures, self-reports, and other-reports (e.g., subordinates' perceptions; see also Chapter 4) shows that the findings are not simply due to biases in either the self-reported measures or our behavioral measures.

Practical Implications

The research presented in the current dissertation is one of the first to outline the importance of a systematic inquiry of the role of discrete (moral) emotions in predicting (un)ethical leadership and deviant behavior on the part of employees. Although conclusions regarding practical implications should be regarded as preliminary and warranting further inquiry, we see potential practical value of our findings. First, chapters two to four reveal that organizations might benefit from including measures of leaders' tendencies to experience feelings of authentic pride, hubristic pride, contempt, as well as a measure of leaders' chronic self-importance of moral identity in their battery of leader selection criteria. As our findings denote, in terms of leader ethical behavior, organizations are likely to benefit from hiring leaders with high levels of authentic pride (or at least low levels of hubristic pride and low levels of contempt), and a highly central moral identity.

Second, in line with previous research findings, the results presented in Chapter 4 suggest that power makes people more likely to act upon their own traits and states. From a practical point of view, it would therefore be wise to be careful with awarding contemptuous leaders but also leaders who are high in hubristic pride and/or lack a strong moral identity, higher levels of power or to promote these types of leaders to higher power positions. In contrast, authentically proud leaders and/or leaders with a strong moral identity could more safely be granted higher levels of power.

Third, the findings presented in Chapter 5 demonstrate that supervisor-directed deviance of employees can have its roots in the

treatment employees receive from their supervisor. Based on various theories (e.g., social exchange theory), we argued and showed that employees deviate against abusive bosses but not against ethical bosses because employees working under the supervision of abusive bosses (in contrast to those working under the supervision of an ethical boss) lack the anticipation of feeling guilty about deviating against their supervisor. Hence, in order to reduce the costly consequences of employee deviance it is essential for leaders to provide ethical leadership and to avoid behaving abusively towards employees. A first step in reducing abusive supervision and strengthening ethical leadership is to raise abusive supervisors' awareness of the negative consequences that their behavior might have. A second step could be geared at training abusive supervisors to adopt a more ethical style of leading. Interventions or coaching sessions devoted to downplay abusive supervisory behaviors and to promote ethical leadership may prove particular helpful in this regard. A third step could revolve around organizations taking steps against the display of abusive supervisory behaviors by developing policies that make clear that the display of such behaviors violate organizational norms. Moreover, a final and related step includes establishing a strong ethical culture within the organization, such that the organizational environment aids in demonstrating ethical leadership and hinders the display of unethical or abusive supervision (cf. Kaptein, 2008).

Concluding Remarks

Unethical and abusive supervision have been associated with substantial psychological and financial costs (e.g., Tepper, 2007). In contrast, ethical leadership is associated with favorable outcomes in the work place (e.g., Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Slavador, 2009). However, our scientific understanding of drivers of leader (un)ethical behavior is constrained by an exclusive focus on more cognitive and rational determinants (e.g., moral reasoning). As people do not always act rationally and do not always seem to be guided by rational decision-making processes

(e.g., Ariely, 2010), this dissertation aimed to shed light on the role of discrete emotions as predictors of (un)ethical leader behavior as well as employees' supervisor-directed deviance. Taken together, we have demonstrated that some emotions may steer leaders in the wrong direction (e.g., hubristic pride, contempt) whereas other emotions may motivate people to act ethically and to refrain from deviant behavior (e.g., authentic pride, anticipated guilt). We hope that we have opened a new avenue for future research exploring which emotions are part of a moral emotive compass and which emotions navigate people towards an immoral course of action.