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Leadership and the More-Important-Than-Average Effect: Overestimation of Group Goals and the Justification of Unethical Behavior

Crystal L. Hoyt
University of Richmond, choyt@richmond.edu

Terry L. Price
University of Richmond, tprice@richmond.edu

Alyson E. Emrick
University of Richmond

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Terry L. Price

Alyson E. Emrick

University of Richmond

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Crystal L. Hoyt, Jepson Hall, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia, 23173; Phone: (804) 287-6825; Email: *choyt@richmond.edu.*

Abstract

This research investigates the empirical assumptions behind the claim that leaders exaggerate the importance of their group's goals more so than non-leaders and that they may use these beliefs to justify deviating from generally accepted moral requirements when doing so is necessary for goal achievement. We tested these biased thought processes across three studies. The results from these three studies established the *more-important-than-average effect*, both for real and illusory groups. Participants claimed that their group goals are more important than the goals of others, and this effect was stronger for leaders than for non-leading group members. In Study 3, we demonstrated the justification bias and connected this bias to beliefs about the importance of group goals. Participants indicated that they would be more justified than others in engaging in unethical behaviors to attain their group's goals; leaders reported being more justified in such deviations than non-leaders; and the more highly leaders evaluated their group's goals, the greater justification bias they reported.

Keywords: Self-enhancement bias; more-important-than-average effect; group goals; leadership; unethical behavior; ethics; morality

Leadership and the More-Important-Than-Average Effect: Overestimation of Group Goals and the Justification of Unethical Behavior

Social psychologists have recently shown an increased interest in understanding ethics and morality (Haidt, 2008), issues that have long concerned those in the field of philosophy. For more than a decade now, philosophers working in ethical theory are have also paid greater attention to experimental work in social psychology (Doris, 1998, 2002; Flanagan, 1991; Glover, 2000; Harman, 1999, 2003). Advocates of this approach to ethics claim that moral theorizing must be appropriately informed by research on well-established psychological phenomena. How people think about morality, as well as how they are motivated by what they take to be its requirements, has important implications for what we can legitimately expect in terms of ethical behavior. Doris (1998, 2002), for example, uses studies on helping behavior and obedience to authority in his critique of virtue theories of ethics. Contrary to the situationist perspective that dominates social psychology, advocates of virtue ethics assume stable behavioral dispositions. According to virtue ethicists' empirically informed critics, social psychological findings give us reason to question the virtue ethicist's claim that people can rely upon personal traits to behave morally across situations.

Social psychologists' mounting interest in empirical ethics can thus provide data that either support or undermine the ethical thinking of philosophers. One such empirical claim is central to the philosophical argument that leaders fail ethically not only because they believe they can get away with immorality but also because they believe that their goals are sufficiently important to justify deviating from moral requirements (Price, 2006). This argument is based on a conceptual distinction between understanding the

content of a moral requirement—for example, that lying is generally wrong—and understanding the *scope* of that requirement—that is, whether the requirement applies in a particular case (Hampton, 1989; Price, 2006). Given this distinction, leaders can accept a general moral requirement but believe that they are justified in deviating from it because they think too highly of their group goals. In short, leaders can believe that their rule-breaking behavior was not wrong after all. This theory of ethical failures in leadership lends itself to social psychological research because the assumptions that leaders will be inclined to overestimate the importance of their goals and that these biases are connected to beliefs about justification are ultimately empirical claims.

In the social psychological literature, studies on self-enhancement phenomena typically focus on individuals' perceptions of their own traits and behaviors relative to the traits and behaviors of others. Focusing the studies in this way may be important for understanding psychological mechanisms that explain why leaders sometimes behave immorally. Leaders' beliefs that they are particularly virtuous or that their behavior is uncharacteristically ethical can compete with the view that they are capable of doing something immoral. However, ethical reasoning involves more than a leader's views of his or her own traits and behaviors. For one thing, it involves the leader's views about the importance of his or her group goals. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate how an extension of self-enhancement phenomena can help us understand the way people, and leaders in particular, think about morality. We empirically address the following questions: Do people think that their group goals are more important than average? In other words, is there a *more-important-than-average effect* for people's beliefs about their goals? Moreover, are these biases stronger for leaders than non-leading group

members? Finally, is there any connection between these biases and beliefs about justification for engaging in unethical behavior in the service of their group's goals? That is, do leaders who exaggerate the importance of their groups' goals also believe that they are more justified than average.

The More-Important-than-Average Effect

The self-enhancement bias, which results from comparative judgments with others at the individual level, is variously referred to as the *better-than-average effect,* the *above-average-effect*, the *uniqueness bias*, and the *Lake Wobegon effect.* According to Alicke and Govorun (2005, p. 85), our inclination to see ourselves in an uncharacteristically positive light is "one of social psychology's chestnuts," having been confirmed "in numerous studies, with diverse populations, on multiple dimensions, and with various measurement techniques." Goethals, Messick, and Allison also note the pervasive differential between how we view others and how we view ourselves: "The uniqueness bias reflects our tendency to see ourselves as somewhat better than average, a tendency that has been observed in a wide variety of domains including vulnerability to major life events, driving abilities, responses to victimization, perceptions of fairness, and goodness" (1991, p. 19).

Although the better-than-average effect is considered to be "one of the most robust of all self-enhancement phenomena," (Alicke & Govorun, 2005, pg. 85) it has not been demonstrated to apply to the goals of the group to which one belongs. In this context, to say that one's goals are *better than average* means that they are *more important than average*. Yet there are good reasons to expect that the general effect extends to group goals. These reasons appeal to the sources and limitations of the effect

itself. Self-evaluation biases have been shown to stem from both non-motivated (e.g., information processing limitations) and motivated sources (e.g., to see oneself in the best possible light; Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). For example, the effect is stronger for moral qualities and behaviors than it is for non-moral traits such as intelligence—precisely because the latter desirable traits, unlike the former, are easily tested against reality (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989). The uniqueness bias is accordingly limited when there is low motivation to see oneself as better than others or when the behavior can easily be verified (Goethals, Messick, and Allison, 1991). Because people's beliefs about the importance of their group goals are desirable but not readily verifiable, the corresponding ratings of importance are likely to display self-enhancement biases.

Enhancement biases in the group context. Although the better-than-average effect has been empirically investigated as an individual-level phenomenon, there are a number of reasons to suggest that this effect likely extends beyond the self to aspects of meaningful groups to which people belong. The highly influential and robust line of research on social identity theory provides strong support for this contention. The part of an individual's self-concept that derives from membership in social groups is referred to as a social identity (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Considerable research on social identity theory has demonstrated that these social identities result in a number of cognitive biases that favor the ingroup and disadvantage the outgroup. For example, *ingroup favoritism* refers to the tendency of people to view their own group more positively than other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979); the *outgroup homogeneity bias* denotes the tendency of people to oversimplify perceptions of outgroup members and have more diversified perceptions of ingroup members (Park & Rothbart, 1982); and the

group serving bias suggests that people make dispositional attributions for their ingroup members' positive behaviors but situational attributions for their negative behaviors, and vice-versa for members of the outgroup (Heine & Lehman, 1997).

The proposed more-important-than-average effect is consistent with the conclusion of the ingroup bias literature that people tend to view the ingroup more positively than other groups (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1982). For example, Sherif and Sherif (1953) found that group members evaluate their group's products more positively than other groups' products, and Price (2000) found that people made more optimistic judgments about their team members' performance than about the performance of non-team members. Not only do people prefer their own meaningful social group over others, but they also show preference for members of trivial ingroups including groups of people who share the same birthday, received the same flip of a coin, or prefer the same artist (Miller, Downs, & Prentice, 1998; Brewer & Silver, 1978; Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Because membership in a group engenders ingroup biases such that 'we' are seen as better than 'they,' there is reason to test the logical inference that 'our' goals will also be perceived as more important than 'their' goals.

The justification bias. People have an astounding aptitude for self-justification (Tavris & Aronson, 2007), and one such method of absolving ourselves from responsibility may originate in perceptions of our groups' goals. Unlike personal goals, group goals are commonly thought to have special moral weight. After all, a large part of ethics education is getting people to think less about their own interests and more about the interests of the collective. Because group goals are often consistent with this social aspect of morality, it would not be surprising to find that people readily use group goals

to ground moral justifications of their behavior. So we predict that, in addition to perceiving that their goals are more important than average, people will also think that they have a special justification to engage in unethical behavior in the service of over-valued goals. This justification bias is just what we should expect from the self-enhancement literature: people are highly motivated to justify their morally questionable behaviors, and there are relatively few objective limitations on their ability to appeal to value judgments to do so.

Leadership and the MITA and justification biases. Leadership is an important component of group life: leaders provide the vision, direction, and goals, and they use social influence processes to transform the individual action of group members into the collective action necessary to achieve those goals (Chemers, 2000; Messick, 2005). Because of their role, leaders have disproportionately greater power than do non-leading group members—both to set collective goals and to mobilize collective action toward those goals (Hogg, 2001). Consistent with the ample social psychological literature demonstrating that people's self-concept, or identity, strongly influences their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Leary & Tangney, 2003), self-identification as group leader can guide the processing of information regarding their group. Hence, the proposed self-enhancement biases regarding the importance of group goals and the related justification bias will likely be amplified for those who self-identity as group leader. After all, leader identity is strongly associated with the attainment of collective goals.

The centrality of both setting and attaining group goals to the leader identity is further evidenced through people's implicit leadership theories. Implicit leadership theories are people's tacit beliefs regarding the traits, qualities, and characteristics of

leaders (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Forsyth & Nye, 2008). The content of these implicit theories is vast, but many of the assumptions focus on establishing objectives, structuring necessary tasks, and ultimately accomplishing group goals. Thus, not only do we predict actual leaders of organizations will show an enhanced MITA effect over their followers, but we predict that to the extent people rely on these implicit theories when simply perceiving themselves as leaders, this enhanced MITA effect should be evidenced even when people are randomly assigned to leadership positions. Furthermore, in keeping with the prediction that overvaluing group goals may be accompanied by a greater justification to engage in unethical behavior, leaders should also demonstrate a greater justification bias than non-leaders.

Research Overview

We employed a multiple study, multi-method approach to testing the following predictions: 1) people's beliefs about their goals will exhibit a more-important-than-average (MITA) effect—they will hold that their group's goals are more important than other groups' goals; 2) people will demonstrate a justification bias—they will deem themselves more justified than others to engage in what is normally considered to be unethical behavior to attain their group's goals; 3) both the MITA effect for group goals and the justification bias will be greater in leaders than in non-leading group members; 4) finally, we predict that the justification bias will be related to beliefs about group goal importance. These hypotheses were tested across three studies. In the first study we tested the MITA effect for group goals with leaders and non-leaders of university campus groups. In Study 2 we sought to experimentally demonstrate the MITA effect for the

goals of illusory groups and in the final study we replicated and extended the second study by experimentally examining the justification bias prediction.

Study 1

With a particular emphasis on leaders, this study explored the extension of self-enhancement biases to group goals. In this study we contacted leaders and non-leading members of student groups and asked them to rate the importance of their group's goals as well as other groups' goals to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Participants will demonstrate a more-important-than-average effect with respect to group goals.

Hypothesis 2: This effect will be stronger for leaders than for non-leaders.

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty-six undergraduate students at the University of Richmond participated in this study (17% First-years, 21% Sophomores, 29% Juniors, and 33% Seniors). Participants included 58 male and 98 female leaders (n = 112) and non-leading members (n = 44) of university organizations. The organizations targeted were student governments (for both of the male and female student coordinate colleges as well as the school of leadership studies), Greek organizations, political interest groups, and religious interest groups.

Procedures

Respondents were recruited during their organizations' meetings and informed that they would be entered in a raffle to win one of a few prizes. We employed two methods to gauge participants' ratings of group goals: they ranked their goals in

comparison to others, and they assessed their and others' goals on a 1 to 5 scale.

Goal importance rankings for fund distribution. Participants were asked to rank their group's goals by responding to the following:

> The Director of Student Activities has decided to distribute funds to the current officially recognized student organizations, one of which is your organization. There are 100 such organizations. If the Director wants to distribute the funds based on the *importance of each organization's goals*, where in the ranking should your organization be put for the distribution of funds? 1 = *most important* organizational goals and 100 = *least important* organizational goals (one organization per ranking).

Goal importance scale. Participants were asked to select the best description of their group's goals: unimportant (1), somewhat important (2), important (3), very important (4), and extremely important (5). They were then asked to indicate the percentage of student groups on campus that have goals best described as being unimportant to extremely important. A final weighted rating of the goals of other organizations was created by multiplying the percentage of organizations reported in each category by the numerical value of the category and summing all five values.

In another approach to gauge goal assessments, participants responded to the following two items on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree): 'the goals of my student organization are important' and 'the goals of the average student organization on campus are important.' The results from these questions directly parallel those of the goal importance scale discussed above, thus, for simplicity, we have not included these results.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Participants will demonstrate a more-important-than-average effect with respect to group goals. First, we examined participants' rankings of their group goals in the fund distribution questions.[1] They were asked to rank their group's goals on a scale from 1(most important) to 100 (least important). Similar to previous research on the above-average effect, we assessed this effect by conducting one-sample t-tests against the midpoint on the scale, in this case, 50 (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Alicke, Vrendenburg, Hiatt, & Govorun, 2001). Participants' average ranking of their groups' goals was 13.67 (SD = 5.53). This ranking is significantly better than the 50th percentile ($t(151) = -17.68$, $p < .00$). In fact, participants ranked their group better than the 70th percentile ($t(151) = -9.35$, $p < .00$).

In another approach to testing Hypothesis 1, we analyzed participants' responses to the 5-point goal importance scale. We conducted a factorial ANOVA with one between-subjects factor (Leader) and one within-subjects factor (Self/Other).[2] Analyses revealed that participants rated the goals of their group as significantly more important than the goals of other student groups (F (1, 132) = 105.43, $p < .00$, $\eta^2 = .44$; self: M = 3.78 SE= .08, others: M = 2.90 SE= .06).

Hypothesis 2: The more-important-than-average effect will be stronger for leaders than non-leaders. First, we conducted a one-way (Leader) between-subjects ANOVA on the fund distribution group goal importance rankings (again, rankings were made from 1[most important] to 100 [least important]). There was a significant main effect of Leader such that leaders' rankings attributed greater importance to group goals

than did the rankings of non-leaders (F (1, 150) = 10.23, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$; leaders: M = 11.10 SE= .05, non-leaders: M = 21.66 SE= .12).

We also tested this hypothesis on the 5-point goal importance scale by examining the simple effects tests from the mixed-factorial ANOVA (B: Leader, W: Self/Other). These tests revealed that leaders rated their group goals as being significantly more important (M = 4.03, SE= .09), as compared to non-leaders (M = 3.54, SE= .14; simple F (1, 132) = 8.85, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$), but there was no difference in leaders' ratings (M = 2.96, SE= .06) and non-leaders' ratings (M = 2.84, SE= .10) of the group goals of others (see Figure 1).

Discussion

The results from this first study established what we call the *more-important-than-average effect*: participants claimed that their group goals are more important than other people's group goals. Furthermore, the more-important-than-average effect was stronger for leaders than for non-leading group members. These findings are quite robust, as they were consistently supported across a variety of measures ranging from the fund distribution ratings to two additional approaches for measuring assessments of goal importance.

Study 2

Study Overview and Hypotheses

In Study 1 we demonstrated that the MITA effect was indeed stronger for leaders than for non-leading group members. Although we contend that this effect is driven by the self-identification as group leader, because we studied actual group leaders and non-leading members we cannot rule out alternative explanations implicating factors

associated with people who become leaders. For example, we can assume that some of these individuals became leaders of their groups precisely because of beliefs about the importance of the groups' goals. So, in this second study, we sought to test experimentally the prediction that the MITA effect is driven by people's self-conception as leaders, rather than factors that explain why they become leaders in the first place. If simply perceiving oneself as a leader is sufficient to activate implicit leadership theories (Forsyth & Nye, 2008), we should be able to demonstrate the MITA effect in those randomly assigned to the leader position. To test this explanation, we conducted an experimental study in which we randomly assigned participants to the role of leader or non-leading member of a group and assessed how important they deemed their groups' goals to test the same hypotheses tested in Study 1.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred and seventy undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill participated in this study (67 men and 103 women). Participants were recruited to participate before their classes began. The experiment employed a 2 (Leader: Leader, Non-leader) by 3 (Group: Business, Service, Political) between-subjects design.

Procedures

Participants were given a vignette with the following instructions: 'For the purposes of this survey, imagine that you are the leader (or non-leading member) of a business (or service, or political) organization on campus. Please take a minute to think of yourself as the leader (or non-leading member) of this kind of organization and then

complete the following items.'

Goal importance. As in Study 1, participants were asked to select the best description of the goals of their student organization: unimportant, somewhat important, important, very important, and extremely important. In addition, they were asked to indicate which of these best describes the goals of the typical organization (political, service, or business) on campus.

Results

Hypotheses 1& 2: Participants will demonstrate the more-important-than-average effect and leaders will demonstrate a stronger MITA effect.

To test these hypotheses, we analyzed participants' responses to the goal importance assessments by conducting a factorial ANOVA with two between-subjects factors (Leader and Organization) and one within-subjects factor (Self/Other). As predicted, there was a main effect of goal importance such that all participants rated their own group's goals as significantly more important than other groups' goals (F (1, 164) = 48.12, $p < .00$, $\eta^2 = .23$; own: $M = 3.76$ $SD = .84$; other: $M = 3.35$ $SD = .93$). Additionally, in support of the second hypothesis, there was a significant interaction between Self/Other and Leader (F (1, 164) = 5.72, $p = .018$, $\eta^2 = .03$). Simple effects tests revealed that leaders rated their group's goals as being significantly more important ($M = 3.90$, $SE = .09$) than did non-leaders ($M = 3.60$, $SE = .09$; *simple* F (1, 164) = 5.59, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .03$), but there was no difference in leaders' and non-leaders' ratings of the importance of the typical group's goals ($M = 3.37$, $SE = .09$, $M = 3.36$, $SE = .10$, respectively, see Figure 1). We included organization type as a factor to test whether the relationship between leader and goal assessment differed across types of organizations.

Analyses revealed that the three-way interaction between goal assessment, leader, and organization was not significant ($p = .245$).

Discussion

In Study 2, we both replicated the more-important-than-average (MITA) effect for group goals found in Study 1 among members of real university groups, and we demonstrated that this effect extends to people assigned to imaginary groups. In addition, people randomly assigned to the role of group leader showed a stronger MITA effect than those assigned to the role of non-leading group member, again replicating and extending the findings from Study 1. Because participants were assigned to the position of leadership, the enhanced MITA effect for leaders appears not to be a peculiarity associated with choosing to take on a leadership position but, rather, the result of a more general cognitive bias associated with the leader role.

Study 3

In Study 3 we set out to replicate the experimental findings by demonstrating both the MITA effect for participants assigned to illusory groups and a greater MITA effect for those assigned to the leader condition. We also sought to link perceptions of the importance of one's goals to the belief that one is justified in deviating from general moral requirements. Thus, we wanted to test three additional hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: Participants will think they are more justified than others in breaking basic moral rules to achieve group goals.

Hypothesis 4: Leaders will report a greater justification bias than non-leaders.

Hypothesis 5: Ratings of group goal importance will be positively correlated with this justification bias.

Method

Participants and Design

Ninety-one undergraduate students at the University of Richmond participated in this study (28 men and 63 women). The experiment employed a 2 group (Leader: Leader, Non-leader) between-subjects design.

Procedures

Participants were given a vignette with similar instructions as in Study 2; however, instead of imagining they are the leader or non-leading member of a specific type of group (business, service, or political), they were simply asked to imagine being a leader or non-leading group member of an organization on campus.

Goal importance. Participants responded to the following two questions: 'The goals of my organization are best described as being…,' and 'The goals of typical organizations on campus are best described as being…' by circling one of the following response options: unimportant, somewhat important, important, very important, and extremely important.

Justification assessment. Using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the following items: 'In some circumstances, it would be alright for me to misrepresent the facts in order to achieve the goals of my organization,' 'In some circumstances, it would be alright for me to misrepresent the facts in order to keep a key group member in the group,' 'In some circumstances, it would be alright for me to misrepresent the facts in order to keep a rival group from doing better than us,' 'When I have to misrepresent the facts, the goals of my organization serve as a justification for my actions,' and 'For the

good of the group, I would be justified in doing what other people might think is unethical.' Participants then responded to the same items in reference to either leaders or non-leading members of other groups depending on their condition. The Cronbach's αs for the self and other justification measures were .90 and .91, respectively.

Results

Hypotheses 1& 2: Participants will demonstrate the more-important-than-average effect and leaders will demonstrate a stronger MITA effect.

We analyzed participants' responses to the goal importance assessments by conducting a factorial ANOVA with one between-subjects factor (Leader/Non-leader) and one within-subjects factor (Goal assessments: Self/Other). There was a main effect of goal assessments such that all participants rated their own group's goals as significantly more important than other groups' goals (F (1, 89) = 61.88, $p < .00$, η^2 = .41; own: M = 3.73 SD= .83; other: M = 3.00 SD= .84). Additionally, in support of the second part of this hypothesis, there was a significant interaction between goal assessment and leader (F (1, 89) = 8.62, p = .004, η^2 = .09). Simple effects tests revealed that leaders rated their group's goals as being significantly more important (M = 4.04, SE= .12) than did non-leaders (M = 3.41, SE= .11; simple F (1, 89) = 15.21, p = .000, η^2 = .15), but there was no difference between leaders' and non-leaders' ratings of the importance of typical group's goals (M = 3.04, SE= .13, M = 2.96, SE= .13, respectively, see Figure 1).

Hypotheses 3, 4 & 5: Participants will demonstrate a justification bias, leaders will demonstrate a greater bias, and this bias will be positively correlated with perceived goal importance.

To test hypotheses 3 and 4, we analyzed participants' responses to the justification questions with a factorial ANOVA with one between-subjects factors (Leader/Non-leader) and one within-subjects factor (Justification: Self/Other). There was a main effect of justification such that all participants rated themselves as being more justified than others (F (1, 89) = 15.17, $p < .00$, $\eta^2 = .15$; self: $M = 2.98$ $SD = 1.35$; other: $M = 2.58$ $SD = 1.21$). In addition, there was a main effect for leader condition such that leaders reported greater levels of justification ($M = 3.03$, $SE = .19$) than non-leaders ($M = 2.54$, $SE = .19$; F (1, 89) = 4.05, $p = .047$, $\eta^2 = .04$). The interaction between justification and leader was not significant ($p = .39$). Based on a priori predictions, we examined the simple effects and found that leaders did report greater agreement that they would be more justified in breaking standard moral rules to achieve their groups goals ($M = 3.27$, $SE = .20$) than non-leaders ($M = 2.69$, $SE = .20$; simple F (1, 89) = 4.38, $p = .039$, $\eta^2 = .05$; see Figure 2). However, the difference in leaders' and non-leaders' ratings of others' level of justification was not significant ($M = 2.79$, $SE = .18$, $M = 2.38$, $SE = .18$, respectively). Additionally, as evident in the main effect for justification, both leaders and non-leaders reported that they would be more justified than others; however, this effect was stronger for leaders (simple F (1, 89) = 11.20, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$) than for non-leading group members (simple F (1, 89) = 4.65, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .05$).

To test hypothesis 5, we created a justification variable by subtracting other justification from self justification; thus, higher numbers indicate a bias in perceiving oneself as more justified than others. This method of computing the justification bias variable is based on similar methods employed by Major, Quinton and Schmader (2003) and Hoyt, Simon, and Reid (2009). There were three outliers in the justification bias

variable; we replaced the outliers with the next closest value. Second, we ran a correlation analysis between the justification bias variable and the participants' assessments of goal importance. This analysis revealed a significant positive correlation, r (89) = .21, p = .05. Finally, we examined this correlation within leader conditions and found that the relationship between justification bias and goal assessments was significant only for leaders (r (43) = .31, p = .04) and was not significant for non-leaders (r (44) = .06, p = .72).

Discussion

In this final study, we successfully replicated the more-important-than-average effect found in the first two studies. Group members indicated that their group goals were more important than other groups' goals, and leaders showed this bias to a greater degree than non-leading group members. In support of our hypotheses about the justification bias, both leaders and non-leaders thought they were more justified than others in engaging in what is normally considered unethical behavior in the service of their group goals, and leaders reported greater levels of justification than non-leaders. In other words, participants—especially leaders—were inclined to see the behavior in question as more permissible when it was carried out by them as compared to when it was carried out by others. This finding is very much in keeping with the distinction noted in the introduction between the content and scope of a moral requirement: people can accept a general moral requirement but decide that it does not apply to them in their particular circumstances. As we also expected, the more important leaders thought their group's goals were, the more justified they thought they were in doing the characteristically unethical act to attain these goals. So leaders' beliefs about the morality

of their actions were connected to their beliefs about goal importance. However, we did not find this effect for non-leading members. This finding supports the claim that leaders have a special justificatory connection to the goals of their groups. When goal achievement is at stake, leaders appeal to the importance of group goals to justify engaging in what are usually thought of as ethically questionable behaviors. Justification for non-leaders does not seem to be similarly related to beliefs about the importance of group goals.

General Discussion

"Moral justification is a powerful disengagement mechanism. Destructive conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of moral ends."

Albert Bandura

The goal of the present research was to use empirical evidence to substantiate the philosophical claims regarding of the psychological underpinnings of unethical leadership. First, the results from these studies established what we call the *more-important-than-average effect*: participants claimed that their groups' goals are more important than other groups' goals. Notably, the more-important-than-average effect occurs in both intact and illusory groups, and it is stronger for leaders than for non-leading group members. In Study 3, participants indicated that they would be more justified than others to engage in unethical behaviors to attain their group's goals, leaders reported being more justified than non-leaders, and the more highly leaders evaluated their group's goals, the greater justification bias they reported.

Theoretical and Applied Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

This research has a number of implications for psychological theory—particularly for social cognitive theory, which is devoted to understanding self-enhancement biases associated with social comparisons. First, although the better-than-average effect has been demonstrated in a wide variety of domains from driving ability (Svenson, 1981) to perceptions of fairness (Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985), this research further extends the scope of self-enhancement biases to perceptions of the importance of group goals as well as to justifications for engaging in unethical behavior to attain group goals. Our finding are consistent with Goethals et al.'s (1991) assertion that the better-than-average bias is more prominent with respect to characteristics that are not easily tested against reality, as the objective importance of group goals and justification for unethical behavior are indeed not empirically verifiable. Confirmation of the more-important-than-average effect is also consistent with the conclusion from the abundant ingroup bias literature that people prefer what is associated with their own group over what is associated with other groups (Tajfel, 1982).

Additionally, this research contributes to a greater theoretical understanding of the role of groups in the understanding of the self. We have shown how self-enhancement biases extend to group goals. Extending the bias to group goals, which are collective in nature, may explain the willingness of leaders to use these goals to justify unethical behavior. Within the group, collective achievement normally has greater moral weight than the pursuit of self-interested aims. In addition, however, our research points to an important moderator of self-concepts and their effects on justification. The role one occupies within the group also makes a moral difference and our findings indicate that

leaders may conceive of their selves in a more interdependent manner than do other members of their groups.

Furthermore, we demonstrated the robustness of the more-important-than-average effect by showing that it applies not only to leaders and non-leading members of real, and arguably meaningful, groups but also to members of less meaningful minimal groups (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Our ability to induce the MITA effect for group goals in participants randomly assigned to imaginary groups, some as imaginary leaders, suggests that the bias stems from self-identification within the group. The enhanced bias demonstrated by leaders points to a special connection between their roles and their perceptions of the importance of group goals. Future research should examine the elements of a leader's self-conception that give rise to these enhanced biases by further examining the extent to which belonging to, and being a leader of, a group affects the way leaders think about themselves and their groups. In addition, since we did not directly test the process in this research, there is an alternative explanation that future research can examine. It might be the case that the enhanced MITA effect for leaders stems from the effects of experiencing power (Galinsky, Jordan, and Sivanathan, 2008) as opposed to conceiving of oneself as a leader.

Notably, this research also contributes to the literature on the role that social cognitive biases may play in unethical behavior (Werhane, 1999; Messick & Bazerman, 1996; Goodpaster, 2007). Previous research on the self-serving bias has shown that people think they are more ethical and they have greater virtues than others (Baumhart, 1968; Hoorens, 1993). Indeed, 50% of respondents rated their morals higher than 90 on a scale from 1-100 (100 being perfect; Lovett, 1997). Even social psychologists are not

immune to viewing themselves as being more ethical than their colleagues in social psychology (Van Lange, Taris, & Vonk, 1997). Although people who think they are more moral than others may be more responsive to increases in accountability (Novicevic, Buckley, Harvey, & Fung, 2008), an unfounded confidence about our morals and values may sometimes blind us to our own potentially unethical behavior. We can be led astray when we ignore morality, but we can also fail ethically when we are convinced that morality is on our side. Future research can further examine this relationship, perhaps by presenting participants with less abstract and more cognitively and emotionally involved moral scenarios.

The findings presented here provide additional evidence that self-enhancement biases—in particular, the tendency to overestimate the importance of group goals—may give rise to leader's beliefs about the justification of what would ordinarily be considered unethical behavior. In Study 3, we demonstrated a strong relationship between leaders' justification bias and their estimation of the importance of their group's goals; however, our study provides only correlational evidence. Future research should manipulate the perceived importance of group goals to determine the extent to which these beliefs causally impact justification for unethical behavior. It is also important to gain a greater understanding of why this relationship exists only for leaders and not for non-leaders. A greater understanding of the thought processes involved in moral justification should help leaders make better decisions and avoid ethical failures. For one thing, advocates of ethical leadership may need to worry less about the selfishness of leaders than about the readiness of leaders to overestimate the importance of group goals. As we have demonstrated, leaders are particularly willing to put their groups' goals ahead of the goals

of other groups. We will therefore need new responses to unethical leadership if the causes of leader immorality go against conventional wisdom.

Summary

In recent years, we have seen ever-increasing media coverage of immoral behavior on the part of elite leaders, oftentimes with catastrophic results. This research tested assumptions related to the philosophical assertion that, in large part, these failures stem from cognitive biases connected to people's beliefs about the importance of group goals (Price, 2006). By examining leading and non-leading members of university groups, we found empirical evidence for these biases: people demonstrate a more-important-than average effect for group goals, and the more-important-than-average effect on perceptions of group goals is stronger for leaders than it is for non-leading group members. By experimentally assigning people to leader or non-leading positions within groups we replicated the more-important-than average effect and the enhancement of this bias for leaders in studies 2 and 3. Finally, in Study 3, we demonstrated that people think they are more justified than others in engaging in what is typically considered to be morally deviant behavior to achieve their groups' goals, that leaders showed a greater justification bias than did non-leaders, and the leaders' justification bias was correlated with perceived importance of group goals for leaders.

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Footnotes

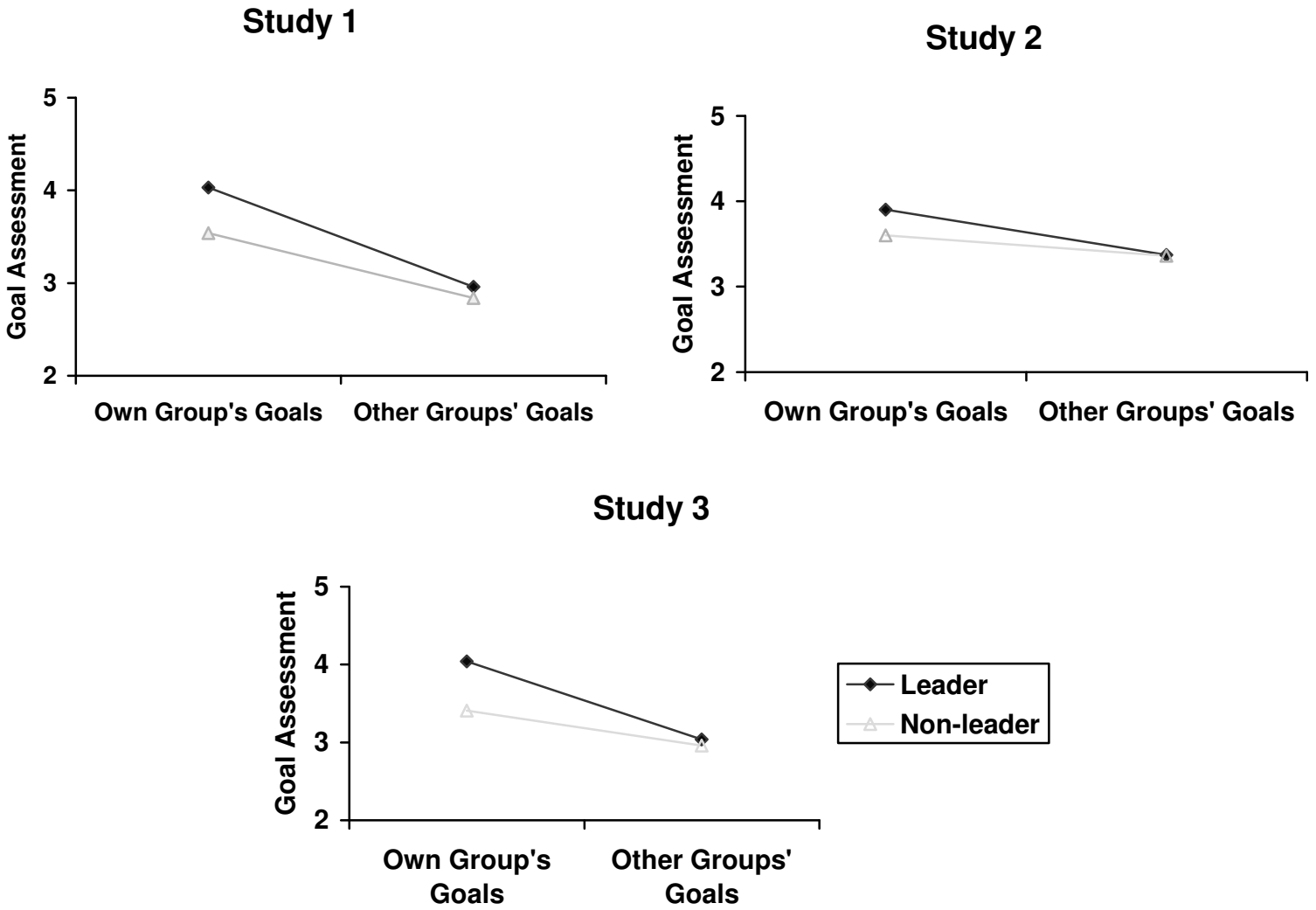
[1]Although the funding questions had participants *rank* goals from 1 to 100, we treat the data as interval level with our statistical procedures. That is, we are treating this data similar to the way most social scientists treat ordinal Likert scale items. In support of this approach, a review of the literature concluded that "for many statistical tests, rather severe departures (from intervalness) do not seem to affect Type I and Type II errors dramatically" (Jaccard & Wan, 1996: 4). Additionally, these variables were positively skewed; the application of a square root transformation removed the skewness. We back-transformed the variables in order to present them in meaningful units.

[2]Because of the unequal sample sizes across conditions, we have employed the General Linear Model using Type III sums of squares (comparing unweighted means) and we report the estimated marginal means (Howell, 2004). Additionally, a few participants failed to accurately complete the measure which explains any discrepancy between the degrees of freedom and the sample size.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Leaders' and non-leading group members' ratings of their own and other groups' goals across all three studies.

Figure 2: Study 3: Leaders and non-leading group members' ratings of their own and others' justification in engaging in unethical behavior to achieve the group's goals.


Study 1
Goal Assessment
5
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Own Group's Goals
Other Groups' Goals
Study 2
Goal Assessment
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2
Own Group's Goals
Other Groups' Goals
Study 3
Goal Assessment
5
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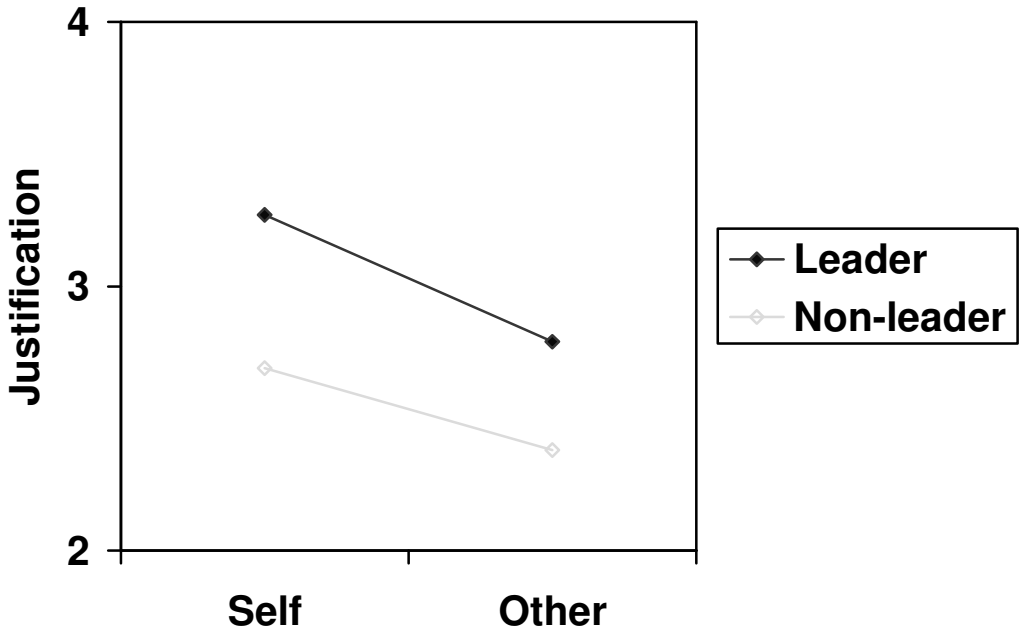
3
2
Own Group's Goals
Other Groups' Goals
Leader
Non-leader


4
3
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Justification
Self
Other
Leader
Non-leader