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The Social Role Theory of Unethical Leadership

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### Abstract

Challenging the standard reasoning regarding leaders' ethical failures, we argue that a potent contributor to these failures is the social role expectations of leaders. We maintain that leaders' central role expectation of goal achievement contributes to the over-valuing of group goals and greater moral permissibility of the means used to achieve these goals. In studies 1 and 2 we demonstrated that the role of leader, relative to group member, is associated with an increased appraisal of group goals which is predicted by the leaders' role expectations and not driven by the psychological effects of power. Next, we experimentally demonstrated the importance of both role expectations of leadership and group goal importance in leaders' justification to engage in morally questionable behavior to achieve group goals. Finally, we supported the social role predictions in a laboratory experiment by assigning people to roles and assessing goal importance and unethical decision-making and behaviors.

Keywords: Social roles; Ethics; Group goals; Power; Morality

### The Social Role Theory of Unethical Leadership

Ethical failures on the part of leaders riddle the lines of history and contemporary newspapers. Oftentimes the response to such failures, both in the scholarly literature and in the popular press, has been to attribute their cause to a kind of individualism not compatible with true leadership. These ethical lapses are generally construed, without scrutiny, to be self-serving, as opposed to group-serving, in nature. Philosophers and political theorists, at least since the time of Plato, have emphasized the necessity of a social orientation for leaders, something thought to be lacking in failed leaders (Plato, 1992). In perhaps the most influential work on the subject, James McGregor Burns claims that without this social orientation, leadership disintegrates into “power-wielding” (Burns, 1978). In this paper, we challenge this self-serving line of reasoning and argue that a potent contributor to leaders’ unethical decision making is the social role expectations that we have of leaders, especially those associated with group goal achievement. In short, the social orientation of leaders may be largely to blame for their ethical failures.

Psychologists have recently turned their attention to questions surrounding ethics and morality, trying to empirically validate, refute, or revise our understanding of the causes of ethical failures in leadership (Hoyt, Price, & Emrick, 2010). Other empirical work focuses on the connection between ethical leadership and both follower conduct and group outcomes (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Walumbwa, Morrison, & Christensen, 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009). Our research builds on these approaches but focuses on the effect of the leader role on unethical leadership, not on the effects that ethical leadership has on role-based behavior of group members. We offer a social role framework that draws on the assumption that leaders play a fundamental role in group life and hold a unique responsibility both to set collective goals and to transform the individual action of group

members into the collective action necessary to achieve those goals (Chemers, 2000; Hogg, 2001; Hoyt, Goethals, & Forsyth, 2008; Messick & Kramer, 2005). Indeed, people often have a romanticized notion of leadership such that leaders are perceived as single-handedly responsible for organizational goal attainment, or lack thereof (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987).

The centrality of goals to the leader role can be further evidenced through people's implicit leadership theories, or people's tacit conceptions of what it means to be a leader (Eden & Leviatan, 1975). Although the content of these theories is vast, intuitive notions of what it means to be a leader often includes commitments to establishing objectives, structuring tasks, and ultimately accomplishing group goals and affecting change. Much of the research examining the impact of perceptual and cognitive processes associated with leadership focus on people's evaluation of present and potential leaders, often in reference to peoples' conceptions of what constitutes an ideal leader (Forsyth & Nye, 2008; Hogg, 2001; Hoyt, Simon, & Reid, 2009; Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996; Lord & Maher, 1991). Importantly, the leader role, as well as all of the affiliated tacit assumptions, can also serve as a powerful guide in determining leaders' behaviors, and how they think about themselves (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2010; Hoyt, Johnson, Murphy, & Skinnell, 2010).

Expectations associated with social roles, such as leadership roles, can powerfully inform people's identities, or self-concepts (Stryker & Burke, 2000; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, de Cremer, & Hogg, 2005). These identities are composed of the understandings people have regarding what it means to hold a particular social role (Stets & Burke, 2003). An ample literature chronicles how these social identities have a profound influence on people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Thus, identification as leader of a particular group can guide the processing of information and behavior in regards to one's group.

Research confirms that social behavior is decidedly regulated by the leader role, a role that can overpower other important influences on behavior such as gender roles (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Hoyt, Price, et al., 2010; Stets & Burke, 2003; van Knippenberg et al., 2005).

Relevant to the present research, we argue that the internalized meanings and expectations associated with the leader role can influence how leaders carry out the ethical decision-making process.

In our social role theory of unethical leadership, we maintain that in positions of leadership, people's ethical decision making is driven in part by their tacit understanding of the requirements of the leader role. The central role expectation of collective goal attainment that is placed upon leaders has the potential to influence the ethical decision-making process and, in some cases, cause ethical failure. According to this theory, the leader role itself can overinflate individuals' felt responsibility and confidence in the importance of the collective goals, thus inducing them to engage in unethical behavior in order to attain those goals. Because those in leadership roles have the propensity to overinflate the importance of group goals, they are in a position to justify deviating from moral requirements to attain those goals (Price, 2008). To provide empirical support for this argument, Hoyt, Price, et al. (2010) demonstrated across three studies that leaders, both existing and experimentally assigned, value their group's goals more than non-leaders do. Furthermore, they demonstrated that leaders believe themselves to be more justified than others to engage in morally deviant behavior to achieve their group's goals and that this justification belief was associated with the value they placed on their group's goals.

Finally, we maintain that this valuation and justification process is independent of the psychological effects of power (Galinsky, Jordan, and Sivanathan, 2008). Being assigned to a leadership role can indeed increase people's experienced power, and although power has been

shown to increase positive action-oriented behaviors, it has also been associated with a number of pernicious effects including ignoring others' perspectives and emotions and objectifying others (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, Galinsky, 2008). These negative psychological effects of power certainly hold the potential for unethical decision making and behaviors (Maner & Mead, 2010). However, these insidious outcomes appear to be driven by self-interest—a process both independent of, and often contrary to, the effect of a leader's social role on unethical behavior. Whereas the leader's role is to exert influence in the service of collective goals, power “is often egocentric, exercised in the service of the self” (Galinsky, et al., 2008) and “power's influence is often directed towards satisfying personal desires” (p.285).

### **The Current Research**

In this research we take a social role perspective to understand the potential for unethical behavior on the part of leaders. We maintain that the obligation of goal achievement associated with the leader role plays a prominent role in the over-valuing of group goals and increasing confidence in the moral permissibility of the means used to achieve these goals. As a result, in their effort to attain group goals, leaders feel more justified than people not in the leader role to engage in what is conventionally considered to be unethical behavior. Recent research has provided initial evidence to support the link between the leader role and a greater valuation of group goals (Hoyt, Price, et al., 2010). Our current research offers a theoretical perspective for understanding this link and extends this work in a number of ways by directly testing the social role theory of leadership. First, in these studies we seek to establish that the obligation of goal achievement associated with the leader role, and not the psychological effects of power, plays a prominent role in the over-valuing of group goals. Next, we respond to the correlational nature

of previous research demonstrating the link between the importance leaders place on their group goals and their justification to engage in morally questionable behavior to achieve those goals. In the current research, we seek not only to causally demonstrate the link between perceived group goal importance and ethical justification but also to directly test the link between the expectations associated with the leader role and ethical justification. Finally, in this research, we extend these findings beyond self-reported ethical justification via vignettes by examining the role of leadership in unethical decision-making and behaviors using an experimental laboratory paradigm.

*Research overview.* In Study 1 we set out to demonstrate that, relative to non-leading roles, the leader role is associated with an increased expectation of goal achievement, which predicts leaders' heightened appraisal of group goals. We then seek to bolster the social role perspective in Study 2 by differentiating the effects of role expectations on leaders' evaluations of group goals from the psychological effects of power. Next, in Study 3, we experimentally manipulate both lay theories of the leader role and perceived goal importance to test their role in people's justifications for engaging in morally deviant behavior to achieve group goals. Finally, in Study 4, we test the social role theory predictions in a laboratory experiment by assigning people to leader or follower roles and assessing perceptions of group goals and unethical decision-making and behaviors.

### **Study 1**

In this study, we set out to both replicate findings that being assigned to a leader role results in increased valuation of group goals (Hoyt, Price, et al., 2010) and to demonstrate that being assigned to the leader role is also associated with greater expectations of goal achievement.



We also set out to establish that expectations of goal achievement are associated with the increased valuing of group goals for leaders but not for non-leading group members.

## **Method**

**Participants and design.** Seventy undergraduate students at a small liberal arts university voluntarily participated in the study and were entered into a raffle for a chance to win a small monetary prize (51% female). The experiment employed a 2 group (role: leader, non-leading group member) between-subjects design.

**Procedure and manipulations.** After providing informed consent, participants, who were randomly assigned to condition, were given a vignette with the instructions to imagine themselves as either “the leader of” or “a non-leading member of” an organization on campus. They were asked to take a minute to think of themselves in this role and then complete the brief survey.

**Goal importance.** Using the same 5-point scale used by Hoyt, Price, et al. (2010), participants were asked to select the best description of the goals of their organization: unimportant, somewhat important, important, very important, extremely important.

**Role expectation of goal achievement: Self and other.** Using a 9-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, all participants indicated their agreement to the following item: “My primary role in the group is to help the group reach its goals.” Next, depending on their condition, participants responded to the same item in regards to the role they were not assigned to: “The primary role of (the other group members/the leader) is to help the group reach its goals.”

## **Results and Discussion**

To test the predictions that those assigned to the leader role would report greater expectations of goal achievement and a greater appraisal of the group goals, we conducted one-way between-subjects univariate analyses of variance on goal importance and the two goal achievement expectations using a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .017 (.05/3; Enders, 2003; Huberty & Morris, 1989). Compared to those in the member condition, those in the leader condition reported that their goals were more important ( $F(1, 68)=28.00, p<.001, \eta^2=.29$ ;  $M_L=4.28, SD_L=.62$ ;  $M_M=3.32, SD_M=.88$ ), they reported having greater goal achievement expectations upon themselves ( $F(1, 68)=9.77, p<.01, \eta^2=.13$ ;  $M_L=7.58, SD_L=1.27$ ;  $M_M=6.53, SD_M=1.54$ ), and they reported that those in the other condition (group member) had lower goal achievement expectations ( $F(1, 68)=6.62, p=.012, \eta^2=.09$ ;  $M_L=7.28, SD_L=1.47$ ;  $M_M=8.09, SD_M=1.13$ ).

Next, the hypothesis that the leadership role will moderate the relationship between expectations of goal achievement and perceived goal importance was tested using regression analyses (Hayes, 2012). Controlling for goal achievement expectations of the other, participants' own goal achievement expectations and rated goal importance were entered into the equation along with the two-way interaction term. Role condition significantly predicts goal importance such that those in the leader condition report greater importance ( $B=.40, p<.001$ ). Although goal achievement expectations do not predict goal importance ( $B=.09, ns$ ) there was an interaction between role and goal expectations ( $B=.13, p=.057$ ; see Figure 1). Tests of simple slopes across levels of condition reveal a significant association between goal achievement expectations and goal importance for leaders ( $B=.21, p=.042$ ) but the relationship is non-existent for non-leading members ( $B=-.04, ns$ ).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

In addition to demonstrating the leader role is associated with greater expectations for attaining the groups' goals and a greater valuation of the goals, this study demonstrates that the expectations for attaining the group goals predicts the value of the goals for leaders but not for non-leading group members. In sum, this study provides evidence for the claim that the increased appraisal of group goals by those assigned to the leader condition is associated with the central role expectation of goal achievement that accompanies the leader role.

### **Study 2**

In this study, we seek to test and dismiss an alternative framework for understanding leaders' inflation of their group goals by examining the psychological effects of power. We maintain that the enhanced evaluation of group goals is driven by the social role attached to leaders, and more precisely the central role expectation of goal achievement, rather than the psychological effects of power associated with leadership. Indeed, it is likely that feeling *powerless*, in contrast to feeling *powerful*, will result in people valuing their group's goals more. The psychological state of powerlessness has been shown to be aversive and lead people to attempt to regain a sense of power by seeking status and this likely extends to seeking status via exaggerating the importance of one's group's goals (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008, 2009). Thus, we also included a low-power condition in this study.

In order to compare the effects of power (either high or low) to the effects of role expectations (leader or group member) on ratings of group goal importance, some participants underwent a power manipulation (high or low) whereas other underwent a role manipulation (leader or follower) before assessing group goal importance. Specifically, for half of the participants we induced a sense of power (high or low) using an experiential power prime (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003) before they evaluated their group's goals. The other half

of the participants were not exposed to a power prime; these participants were exposed to a role manipulation (leader or group member) before they evaluated their group's goals.

## **Method**

**Participants and design.** One hundred twenty-eight undergraduate students at a small liberal arts university were recruited to participate in the study (50% female). The experiment employed a 4 group (high-power, low-power, leadership role, member role) between-subjects design with participants randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

**Procedure and manipulations.** This study consisted of two-parts: participants were asked to complete a writing activity before responding to a survey. The writing activity was used to manipulate a sense of power. For half of the participants, power was manipulated using a common experimental technique: asking participants to recall a time when they had power over another individual (high-power) or a time when someone else had power over them (low-power; Galinsky et al., 2003). The other half of the participants (in the role manipulation conditions) also completed a writing activity (for experimental control purposes), but this writing task did not manipulate power; it merely asked them to describe the way they typically spend their evenings. Next, all participants were asked to imagine belonging to an organization. For those participants in the role manipulation conditions (that is, those who were not in the power manipulation conditions), assignment to the group roles was manipulated using procedures similar to Study 1: participants were asked to imagine that they are either leaders or members of an organization on campus and to take a minute to imagine this before responding to the outcome measure. Participants in both power conditions were asked to imagine being members of an organization.

**Goal importance.** Using the same 5-point scale used in Study 1 (Hoyt, Price, et al.,

2010), participants were asked to select the best description of the goals of their organization ranging from unimportant to extremely important.

### **Results and Discussion**

Two people failed to complete the survey leaving a final sample size of 126. To test the predictions we conducted a one-way between subjects univariate analysis of variance on reported goal importance. As predicted, goal importance varied by condition ( $F(1, 122)=4.41, p=.006, \eta^2=.10$ ; see Figure 2). Protected LSD post hoc tests revealed that those in the leader condition reported significantly greater goal importance than those in the control ( $p=.005$ ) and in the high power condition ( $p=.010$ ). People's views of goal importance in the leader condition did not differ significantly from the views of individuals in the low-power condition ( $p=.67$ ) which in turn was significantly greater than in the high-power ( $p=.028$ ) and control conditions ( $p=.015$ ). These findings replicate Study 1 and earlier work showing that simply assigning people to the leader role leads to a greater valuation of the group's goals relative to those assigned to a non-leading role. Additionally, the psychological effects of power do not appear to extend to increased valuing of group goals. Indeed, as we expected it is those in the *low* power condition who showed higher goal evaluations. These results are consistent with a motivation to reduce the aversive psychological state by increasing the status of their group (Keltner et al., 2003; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008, 2009). In sum, this study provides evidence for the claim that the increased valuing of group goals by those assigned to the leader condition is driven by the social role that leaders occupy and not by the psychological effects of power.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

### **Study 3**

This next study seeks to examine further the social role perspective as it applies to unethical decision making in leadership. First, the social role perspective maintains that the leader role brings with it an enhanced expectation to attain group goals and that this perception grounds beliefs about justification for leadership behavior carried out in the name of goal achievement. Previous research, including the first two studies, has relied on people's own lay, implicit theories of leadership. In this study we manipulate people's theories or understandings of the leader role. We predict that when participants are explicitly told that the objective of leadership is to attain group goals, we will see an increase in putative justification for engaging in unethical behaviors to attain those goals. In addition to comparing this manipulation to a control condition in which participants' theories were not manipulated, we also compare it to a condition where participants' understandings of the leader role is focused on upholding ethical standards. Given our argument that people's understanding of the leader role is influential in decisions they make when occupying the role, we predict that those focused on maintaining ethical standards will exhibit the least justification for engaging in unethical behaviors.

Second, the social role perspective maintains that increased perceptions of goal importance are associated with greater moral permissibility of the means used to achieve these goals (Price, 2008). To provide further support for our social role theory of unethical leadership, we experimentally manipulated group goal importance to directly test its role in people's justifications for engaging in morally deviant behavior to achieve group goals.

## **Method**

**Participants and design.** Two hundred ninety-six undergraduate students at a small liberal arts university were recruited to participate in the study (50% female). The experiment

employed a 2 (goal importance: high, low) by 3 (leadership theory: goal-focused, ethical standard-focused, control) between-subjects design.

**Procedure and manipulations.** Participants were randomly assigned to respond to one of six vignettes. To manipulate goal importance we focused on both superficiality and the universal value of benevolence (Schwartz, 1994). Participants were asked to imagine that they are the leader of either a for-profit cosmetic corporation or a non-profit corporation focused on helping families whose parents have lost their jobs. Next, participants were not told what the leadership objective is (control); or they were told that as leader of this organization, the objective is to do what it takes to “establish and successfully complete the goals set by your organization;” or they were told that the objective is to “uphold a high ethical standard and to represent this standard both within the organization and the community.” Participants were then asked to respond to the manipulation check items regarding goal importance. Finally, participants read the following vignette and responded to the ethical justification measure:

*Your organization recently received a monetary prize in recognition of its success. In order to receive the prize money you had to agree to use it in a way directed by the award committee. However, you now believe that the resources should go elsewhere in order to further your organization’s goals. Information regarding how the prize money was spent will never be published or disclosed and no one will ever find out how the funds were utilized.*

**Manipulation check.** The goal importance measure from the first two studies (Hoyt, Price, et al., 2010) was used to check the efficacy of the goal importance manipulation.

**Ethical justification measure.** We assessed ethical justification by modifying Hoyt, Price, et al.’s (2010) general ethical justification measure to refer to the vignette participants

were given. Using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), participants were asked to indicate their agreement with 4 items including: “I would be justified in misusing the money to support my organization’s goals,” “In this circumstance, it would be alright for me to misrepresent the facts regarding how I spent the money,” “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” ( $\alpha=.87$ ).

### **Results and Discussion**

First, to test the efficacy of the manipulation we conducted a two-way (goal importance and leader role) between-subjects ANOVA on goal importance. As expected, the only effect was with goal importance: those in the high goal importance condition reported their goals to be significantly more important ( $M=4.34$ ,  $SD=.71$ ) than those in the low goal importance condition ( $M=3.91$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ;  $F(1, 290) = 18.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ ).

Next, to test the primary predictions we conducted a similar test on justification. First, participants in the high goal importance condition reported a greater level of justification to engage in ethically questionable behaviors to attain their group’s goals than those in the low importance condition ( $F(1, 290) = 5.59$ ,  $p = .019$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ ; see Figure 3). Next, there was a significant main effect for leadership theory ( $F(2, 290) = 6.86$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ ). Protected LSD post hoc tests revealed that those in the goal-focused leadership theory condition reported significantly greater justification to engage in unethical behaviors than those in both the ethical standard-focused leadership theory condition ( $p < .001$ ) and the control condition ( $p = .029$ ). The responses in the ethical standard-focused leadership theory condition did not significantly differ from those in the control condition ( $p = .162$ ). Finally, there was no interaction between the manipulations ( $F(2, 290) = 1.26$ , ns).



INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Previous research has shown that the more people value their group's goal, the more likely they are to feel justified to engage in unethical behaviors to attain those goals (Hoyt, Price, et al., 2010). That research manipulated the valuation of group goals by assigning people to group leader or member roles, as we did in the first two studies. However, this study directly tested and supported the role of perceived goal importance in justification by manipulating goal importance: being assigned to a leadership position of an organization with more, as opposed to less, worthy goals is associated with perceptions of greater justification to engage in morally questionable acts in service of the group. Furthermore, these data provide additional support for the argument that unethical behavior on the part of leaders may in part be due to the beliefs associated with the social role of being a leader, particularly the felt responsibility for goal attainment. By manipulating people's theories of leadership, specifically, their understanding of the purpose of leadership and its relation to goal achievement, this study demonstrated that making goal attainment the salient function of the leader role can threaten ethical decision-making processes.

#### **Study 4**

This final study uses a laboratory experiment to further test the assertions in the social role approach to the ethical decision-making process in leadership. The goal of this study is to demonstrate, once again, that being assigned to the role of group leader, as opposed to member, can lead to over-inflation of group goals. Furthermore, in this study we sought to directly test the prediction that the leader role would be associated with enhanced unethical decision making and behavior in the service of collective goal attainment. Specifically, in this study we measured participants' self-reported intentions to engage in specific unethical behaviors related to the

group task, and we assessed ethical behavior by presenting participants with an opportunity to cheat on problem-solving tasks (Ariely, 2012; Gino & Ariely, 2012).

### **Method**

**Participants and design.** Sixty-three undergraduate students at a small liberal arts university were recruited to participate in the study (56% female); participants were given \$7 for their time and a chance to win either \$50 or \$100. The experiment employed a 2-group (group role: leader, member) between-subjects design.

**Procedure and manipulations.** Participants were run individually in the laboratory. Participants were told it was a study on group processes and they would be part of a group of twenty students involved in a campus-wide competition regarding the implementation of a zip-car system on campus. Participants were given a fake college newspaper article, which provided details of the competition, as well as a letter of intent. The letter explained their involvement in the competition and clarified that they are part of “Team Zip” and they are competing against “Team Zoom.” It also explained that before meeting their team they will undertake two individual tasks and doing well on them will benefit both themselves and their group. Thorough post-experimental debriefings revealed that all participants understood that doing well on these tasks would benefit not only themselves but also their group. To encourage psychological involvement, financial incentives were offered. Participants were told that each member of the winning team would be awarded \$50 and that the MVP of the group, regardless of that person’s role in the group, would be awarded an additional \$100. Participants were randomly assigned to either a leader or member position and no reason was given for these assignments. Participants then completed a goal importance measure and a task-strategy questionnaire measuring their willingness to engage in unethical behaviors in order to do well on the group task. Finally,

participants completed two individual behavioral tasks and were given an opportunity to misrepresent their performance on these tasks.

**Behavioral tasks.** We employed a standard approach to assessing ethical behavior in the laboratory by presenting participants with an opportunity to cheat on problem-solving tasks (Ariely, 2012; Gino & Ariely, 2012). Participants completed both tasks alone and were told that they would keep their actual test sheets and only hand in the answer sheet on which they self-reported their task scores. This aspect of the experimental design provided them with an opportunity to overstate their performance on the tasks. Participants were given 5 minutes to complete the first task, a modification of Baumeister's geometric figure tracing task (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). In order to complete a puzzle successfully they needed to recreate the figure without lifting their pen or retracing any lines. One of the puzzles was solvable, and others were impossible to solve. Next, participants were given an impossibly short amount of time (5 minutes) to fully complete a matrix exam task (Ariely, 2012; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). They were presented with an exam comprised of 20 basic matrix puzzles, each containing 12 cells with 3 digit numbers in each (e.g. 3.27). Their task was to find two numbers within each matrix that adds to a total of 10.00. During debriefing, the experimenter collected the participants' actual task sheets in order to check for misrepresentation on the answer sheet.

**Measures.** Unless the instructions specified otherwise, participants responded to items using a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Manipulation check.** In order to verify that participants understood their role and were psychologically involved in the task they were asked to indicate which group they were a member of, Team Zip or Team Zoom, and what role they would play in the group, leader or group member.

**Goal importance.** The following three items were used to assess group goal importance: “The goals of my team, Team Zip, are important,” “The goals of my group, Team Zip, are important to other members of my group,” and using a 1 (strongly unimportant) to 7 (strongly important) scale: “I think the goals of my team, Team Zip, are best described as” ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

**Unethical decision-making.** A 6-item task strategy questionnaire was developed to determine what the participants would be willing to do in order to do well in the upcoming group competition. This measure is modeled after standard scenario-based unethical decision making measures (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008). Rather than being asked to imagine particular scenarios and answer questions, participants were asked to respond in regard to their upcoming group competition. Items include “I would be willing to accept a financial bribe to gain extra resources,” “I would be willing to use an existing relationship in the opposing group if that would help us get information about the opposing group's plans,” “I would be willing to steal money and/or resources from the other team,” “I would be willing to engage in what some might say are sneaky tactics,” “I would be willing to flirt with a member of the opposing group to distract the group member from doing his or her work,” and “I would be willing to hide information that is supposed to be accessible to all groups ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Unethical task behaviors.** A dichotomous *cheating* variable was created by categorizing anyone who reported doing better than they actually did on either task as a cheater and all others as non-cheaters.

## **Results and Discussion**

All participants correctly answered the team identity manipulation check and all but one person correctly identified their role in the group, leaving a final sample size of 62. The impact of the leader role on reported goal importance and unethical decision making was assessed with a

one-way between-subjects MANOVA (Wilks'  $\lambda = .89$ ,  $F(2, 59)=3.66$ ,  $p=.032$ ,  $\eta^2=.11$ ).

Compared to participants randomly assigned to the member role, those in the leader role rated their groups goals as more important ( $F(1, 60)=5.50$ ,  $p=.022$ ,  $\eta^2=.08$ ), and reported a greater willingness to engage in unethical behaviors to help the group attain their goals ( $F(1, 60)=4.04$ ,  $p=.049$ ,  $\eta^2=.06$ ; see Figure 4).

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Next, we examined unethical behaviors across conditions. More participants cheated when in the leader ( $n_{\text{cheater}} = 13$ ;  $n_{\text{non-cheater}} = 17$ ) compared to the member condition ( $n_{\text{cheater}} = 8$ ;  $n_{\text{non-cheater}} = 24$ ). The most common cheating response was misreporting the attainment of one additional puzzle or matrix ( $n = 10$ ) with the second most common response being a misreport of two ( $n = 5$ ). A directional Pearson chi-square test on this dichotomous cheating variable approached significance revealing that those in the leader role were more likely to cheat than those in the member role ( $\chi^2=2.32$ ,  $p=.064$ ).<sup>1</sup> Lastly, there was no significant correlation between unethical decision making and unethical task behaviors. Although the measures were designed to be independent behavioral ethics assessments, with one assessing unethical intentions regarding the group competition and the other assessing unethical behavior on the individual problem solving tasks, it is somewhat surprising that they are unrelated. One potential explanation may lie in the differing levels of objective self-awareness across the self-report and behavioral situations (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). It is likely that the individual problem solving tasks induced greater levels of self-awareness and increased self-awareness can make internal ethical standards more salient and influence willingness to engage in unethical behaviors (Mazar & Ariely, 2006). In

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<sup>1</sup> A logistic regression analysis revealed similar findings,  $B = .42$ ,  $p = .065$ , 1-tailed.

any case, although unrelated, there is an effect of the leader role on both ethical decisions and behaviors relevant to group success.

Before testing the mediational predictions, we tested whether our mediator is endogenous with our dependent variable by estimating the Durbin-Wu-Hausman (DWH) test. To do so we compared our estimates from the OLS regression to those from a 2SLS regression using the manipulation as the instrument. A non-significant Sargan chi-square test ( $NR^2 = 0.00$ ) revealed that the manipulation is a valid instrument. An examination of the strength of our instrument in the first stage in our 2SLS analysis confirmed that our instrumental variable had a significant effect ( $F(1,60) = 5.50, p = .022$ ). Finally, the DWH test statistic comparing the estimates from the OLS ( $B = .39, SE = .17$ ) and the 2SLS ( $B = 1.16, SE = .65$ ) analyses revealed that the DWH chi-square (1.24) was non-significant, suggesting a lack of endogeneity.

Finally, to test the prediction that goal importance mediates the impact of the leader role on unethical decision making, a mediational analysis using the bootstrapping approach was conducted. Using Hayes' (2012) Process macro, a bootstrap-based bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval (95%) for the indirect effect was generated by taking 5,000 samples from the original data set. These samples were used to calculate estimates of the conditional indirect effect of leader role on unethical decisions through goal valuation. The cutoff value in the lower-tail of the bootstrap distribution of conditional indirect effects was above zero  $\{.005, .289\}$  indicating significance. In sum, the leaders' greater propensity to make unethical decisions on behalf of their group's welfare is driven, in part, by how important they perceive their group's goals to be (see Figure 5 for path coefficients).

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

## General Discussion

In this paper, we provide support for the social role theory of unethical leadership. This theory maintains that the central role expectation of goal achievement that is placed upon leaders contributes to over-valuing group goals and having an increased confidence in the moral permissibility of the means used to achieve these goals. The first two studies examine the link between the leader role and goal valuation to test our claim that enhanced evaluation of group goals is driven, at least in part, by the central role expectation of goal achievement rather than the psychological effects of power associated with leadership. Study 1 provides support for the claim that the increased appraisal of group goals by those assigned to the leader role is associated with the principal role expectation of goal achievement. To rule out an alternative explanation for the increased appraisal of group goals, Study 2 supports the contention that these leader role effects do not appear to be driven by the psychological effects of power. This finding is further supported in another study conducted in our laboratory similar to Study 2 wherein 138 participants were assigned to a high power, low power, or control condition (no leader condition) and responded to an assessment regarding the importance of the goals of an organization to which they belonged. High power did not influence goal assessments and, similar to Study 2, those in the low power condition showed a non-significant trend of reporting greater goal importance than the other conditions. Although psychological power certainly is one force that can contribute to unethical behaviors on behalf of leaders (Galinsky et al., 2008), this research shows that unique elements of the leader role can impel occupants of the role to inflate the importance of their group's goals which can lead to entertaining ideas of attaining their goals through nefarious means.

We then turned to our attention to linking both expectations associated with the leader role and perceived goal importance to people's justifications for engaging in morally deviant

behavior to achieve group goals. In Study 3, we focused on the relationship between both goal importance and theories of the leader role and leaders' perceived justification to engage in unethical behaviors to attain the group goals. This study demonstrated that leaders of groups with what were thought to be worthier goals are more likely to feel justified to engage in unethical behavior to attain the group goals than those with less worthy goals. Furthermore, participants primed to conceive of the leader role primarily in terms of goal achievement reported a greater justification than participants in other conditions. Finally, Study 4 demonstrated that participants randomly assigned to the leader role in a laboratory group task were more inclined to make unethical decisions and engage in unethical behavior to help attain their group's goals. Furthermore, the value placed on the group's goals mediated the unethical decisions.

This research has a number of theoretical implications particularly for social cognitive theory as it relates to leadership. It has been argued that leadership is in the eye of the beholder, with people identifying leaders as those who match their implicit theories regarding the characteristics and behaviors of leaders. This research demonstrates how these implicit belief sets can also have an impact on individuals in the leader role. Indeed, the meanings and expectations associated with the leader role can contribute greatly to people's identities and their resultant behaviors and choices. Although these belief sets have been shown to vary across cultures, leadership domains, and people (Forsyth & Nye, 2008; House & Javidan, 2004; Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984), a number of qualities deemed necessary for leadership, such as responsibility for collective goal attainment, persist across contexts. The current research demonstrates the potency of the social role expectations of leaders as the predicted effects were demonstrated across manipulations from imagining being a leader (or member) of a non-



specified campus organization, imagining leading a specified organization (non-profit or for profit), or being assigned to a leader role in an experimental group setting.

Our findings support the contention that the expectation of collective goal attainment is a robust and central component of people's intuitive notions of leadership and that this expectation, at least in part, drives increased valuation of group goals and a greater confidence in the moral permissibility of the means used to achieve those goals on the part of leaders. First, by assessing people's naturally occurring leadership theories, we show that the leader role is indeed associated with greater expectations for attaining group goals and that these expectations predict the value of the goals for leaders but not for non-leading group members. Next, across studies using experimental vignettes or experimental assignment of participants to a leader or member role, the leader role reliably predicts greater valuation of group goals. Finally, experimentally altering people's understanding of the leader role to focus more or less on the importance of group goal attainment reliably predicts their perceived justification to engage in ethically questionable behaviors to attain their group's goals. Although we do not maintain that the expectation of goal attainment is the only factor associated with the leader role that contributes to these findings, we have empirically supported the argument that it is one important factor.

This work also makes contributions to research on moral psychology and ethical leadership. A growing body of literature is examining powerful and oftentimes subtle factors that influence ethical decision making (Gino & Pierce, 2009; Mazar et al., 2008; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). This line of research serves to demonstrate that ethical behaviors and decisions can be reliably and predictably influenced by psychological factors beyond our awareness and often operating in some way to help maintain a positive self-concept (Chugh, Bazerman, & Banaji, 2005; Mazar et al., 2008). Taking a social psychological perspective, our work in

consistent with models of morality that contend that situations can affect aspects of the self-concept and ultimately morality (Monin & Jordan, 2009). In our research we extend these psychological perspectives to the domain of leadership (Brown & Trevino, 2006) and, like much of this work, situate our model in group life and the roles people take in within groups. Our studies demonstrate that there is a special connection between assuming the role of leader and the value one places on group goals and one's willingness to engage in questionable tactics to attain those goals.

Our research is not without its limitations. Our reliance on college student samples raises concerns regarding the generalizability of our findings. These concerns are somewhat assuaged to the extent that undergraduate student samples have been shown to be useful for research focused on understanding psychological processes and they have been shown to produce similar results as adult samples (Greenberg, 1987; Locke, 1986). Another potential issue to consider when investigating ethical decision making and behavior is social-desirability bias (Randall & Fernandes, 1991). We are not overly concerned with this issue for a few reasons. First, researchers have shown a relatively robust level of moral disengagement from undergraduate students (Detert et al., 2008). That is, people are able to engage in unethical behavior or decision making without guilt or self-censure (Bandura, 1986). Even so, participants were assured that their responses would be kept completely confidential. Finally, the impact of social desirability concerns on participants would likely only serve to work against us by attenuating the significance of the effects.

Another potential concern with the current research is the extent to which our findings are relevant to actual ethical lapses in behavior. In study 3 we assessed participants' justification for engaging in unethical behaviors. Empirical research, using justification measures similar to ours,

has shown that participants' tendency to justify their unethical actions predicts unethical behavior (Gino & Ariely, 2012). Furthermore, unethical behavior can in turn contribute to increased moral disengagement triggering a downward spiral into moral failure (Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011). In the final study we turned to measuring actual cheating behavior during the individual task portion of the study as well as intentions to engage in unethical behaviors in the group competition. Although we did not assess behavior in the group competition, previous research using similar measures of unethical intentions has shown them to significantly predict actual behavior relevant to the measured intention (Detert et al., 2008). Finally, the consistency of our results across a variety of measures (including ethical justification, ethical decision making intentions, and cheating behavior) speaks to the robustness of the effect.

This research holds important implications for helping stem moral failure in group life. Gaining a greater understanding of the processes involved in ethical decision making should ultimately help leaders make better decisions and avoid ethical failures. Importantly, our research challenges the conventional wisdom associated with leaders' unethical decision making which is often focused on the self-serving nature of ethical lapses of leaders. In our current research we have provided evidence demonstrating that a potent contributor to leader immorality is the social role expectations that we have of leaders and that they have of themselves. The social role theory of unethical leadership suggests that advocates of ethical leadership may need to worry less about the selfishness of leaders and instead turn their attention to the development of leaders' identities and conceptions of the leader role. This suggestion is consistent with Lord and Hall's (2005) exhortation of the importance of developing leader identities grounded in principled values.

This initial support for the social role of leadership ethics opens up many possibilities for future scholarly research. Given the important role that perceptions of goal importance play in unethical justification and decision making, future research should more closely examine factors, in addition to the leader role, that contribute to enhanced perceptions of goal value. Another avenue for future research would be to examine how a leader's social role might moderate the impact of various personality factors in making ethical decisions. Research has shown that personality-based behaviors can be mitigated as the situational, or role-based, demands increase (Mischel, 2004; Zaccaro, Gulick, & Khare, 2008). One disposition that can influence ethical decision making is the extent to which people define themselves through their social relations, or the extent of their interdependent self-construal. The literature suggests that those with more interdependent selves show an enhanced concern for social obligations, norms, and justice, and they respond more strongly to what they perceive to be acts of injustice (Gollwitzer & Bucklein, 2007; Van Prooijen & Van den Bos, 2009). Thus, greater interdependent self-construal generally predicts lower levels of willingness to engage in unethical behavior. However, the expectations associated with the leader role may alter the relationship between interdependence and unethical decision making.

### **Conclusions**

These four studies, in combination with previous research (Hoyt, Price, et al., 2010), provide evidence for a social role theory of unethical leadership. Although investigations into leadership and ethical failures are not new, most approaches examine the self-serving, as opposed to group-serving, ethical lapses of leaders (Rus, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010). According to our perspective, leaders may be inclined to engage in unethical behaviors, in part at least, because of the group-serving social role expectations of goal attainment. Importantly, and

somewhat paradoxically, this expectation has the potential to contribute to ethical failures.

Taking on a leadership role can be associated with an increased valuing of the group's goals and potentially an increased willingness to engage in ethically questionable behavior in service of these goals.

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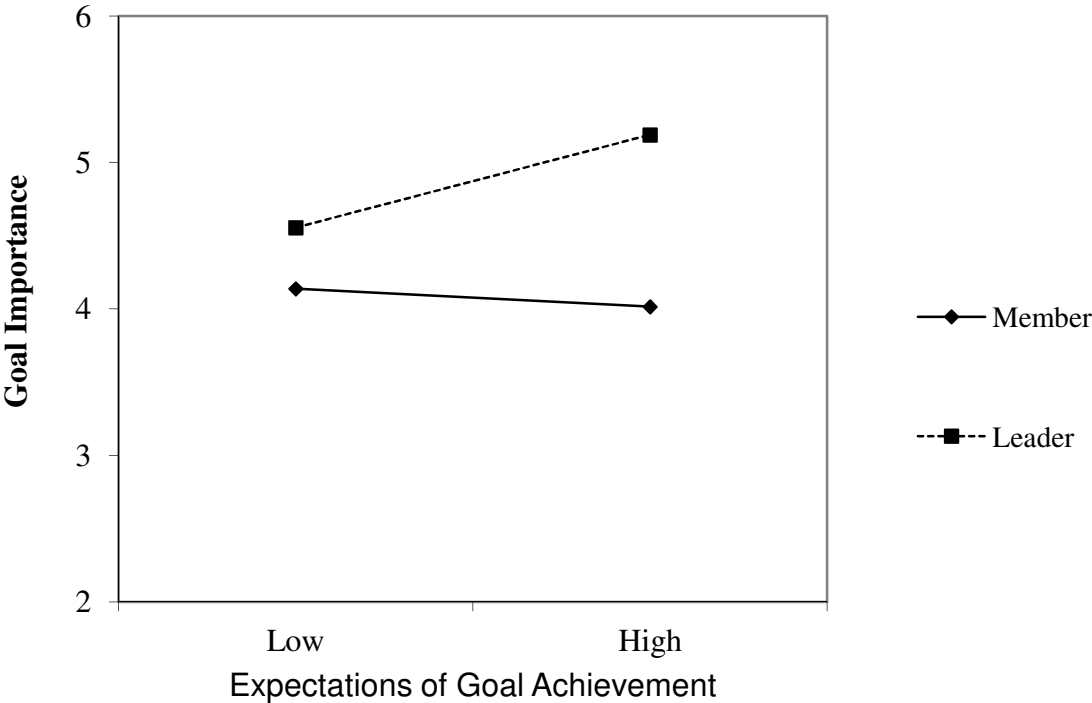
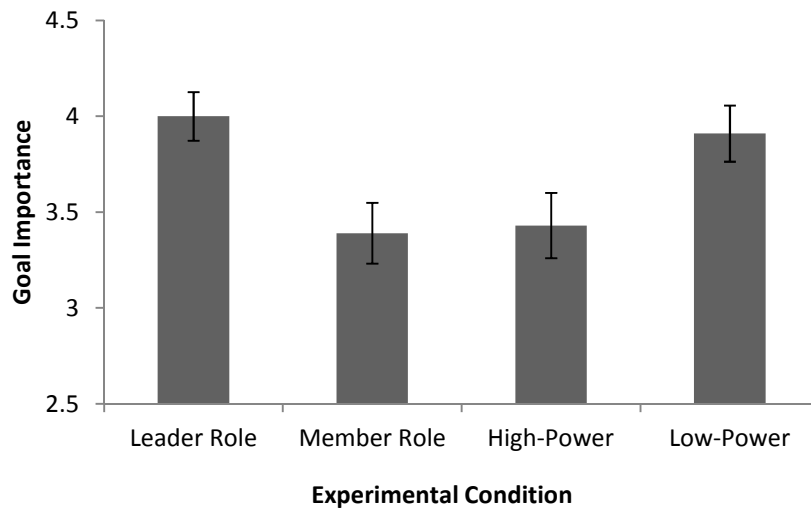
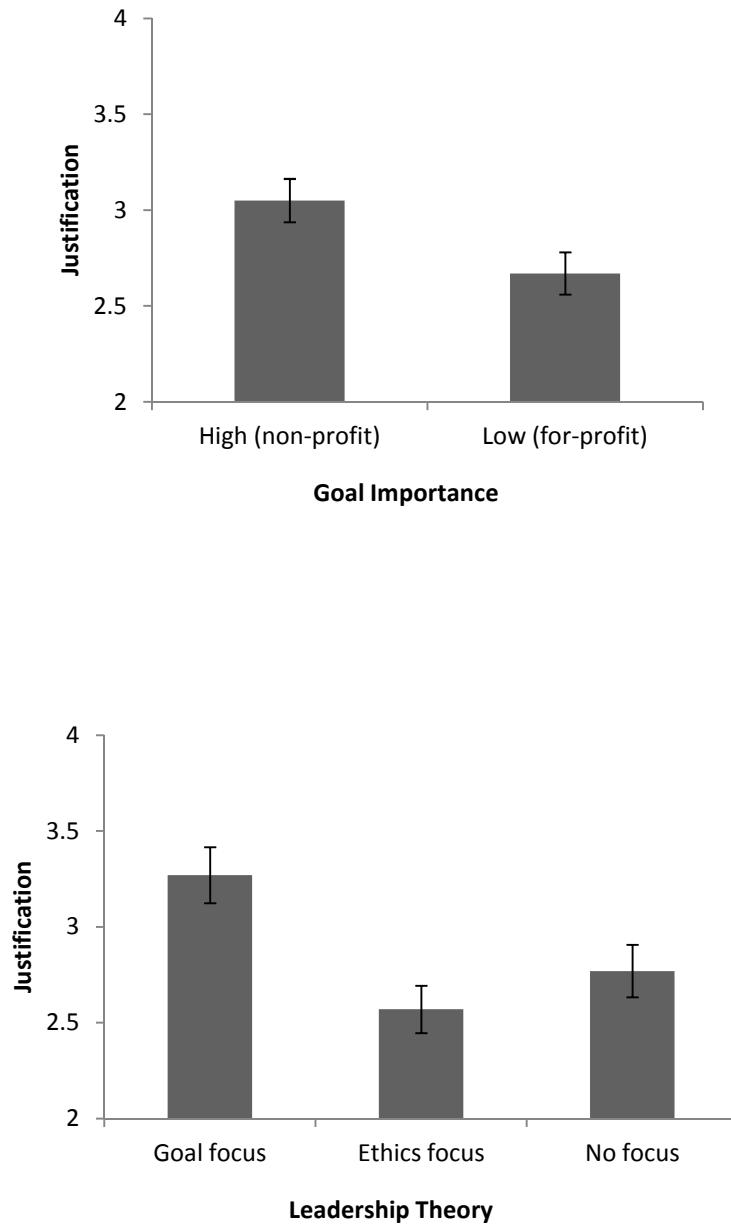


Figure 1. Group goal importance as a function of experimental condition and perceived responsibility for goal attainment. Scores range from 1 to 9.

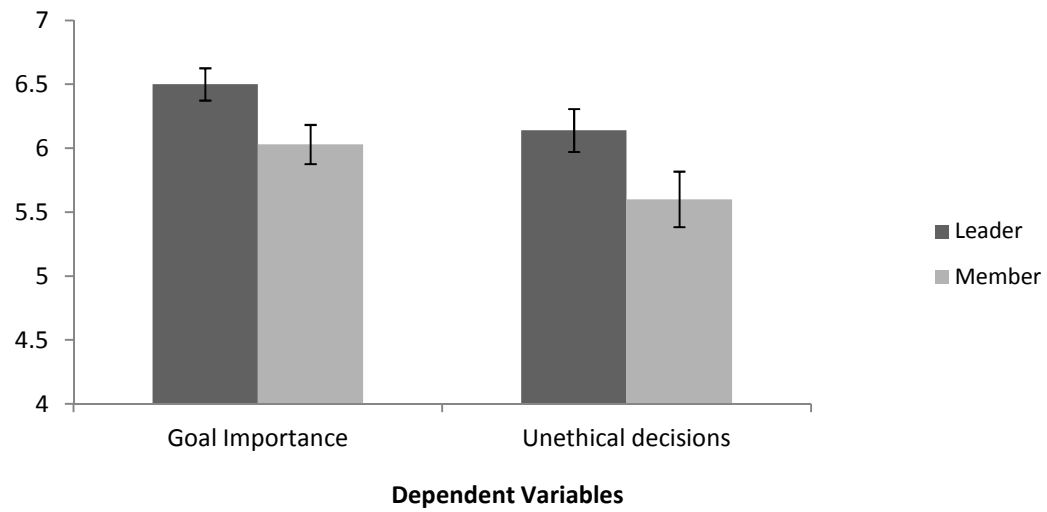


*Figure 2.* Study 2: Group goal importance as a function of experimental condition. Scores ranged from 1 to 5. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

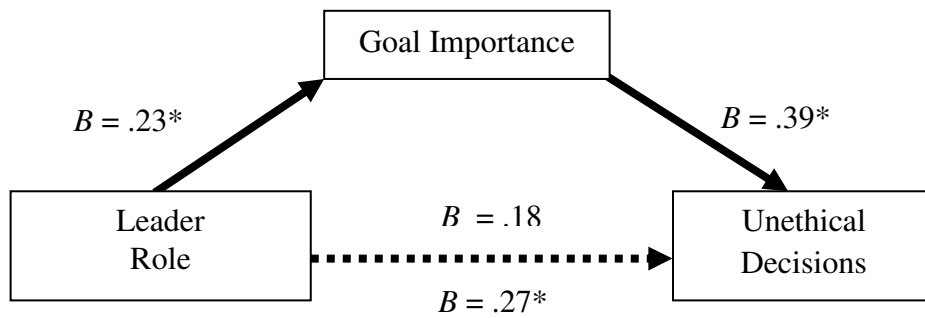


*Figure 3.* Study3: Leaders' justification to engage in unethical tactics to help achieve group goals as a function of manipulated goal importance (top panel) and manipulated leadership theory (bottom panel). Scores ranged from 1 to 7. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.





*Figure 4.* Study 4: Participants' scores on dependent measures as a function of leader/member condition. Scores ranged from 1 to 7. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.



\*=  $p < .05$

*Figure 5.* Study 4: The mediating role of perceived goal importance in leaders' unethical decision making. Leader role: 1 = leader, -1 = member.