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Ethical Decision Making and Leadership: Merging Social Role and Self-Construal Perspectives

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Abstract

This research extends our understanding of ethical decision making on the part of leaders by merging social role and self-construal perspectives. Interdependent self-construal is generally seen as enhancing concern for justice and moral values. Across two studies we tested the prediction that non-leading group members' interdependent self-construal would be associated with lower levels of unethical decision making on behalf of their group but that, in contrast, this relationship would be weaker for leaders, given their social role. These predictions were experimentally tested by assigning participants to the role of leader or non-leading group member and assessing the association between their interdependent self-construal and their unethical decision making. Across both studies interdependence predicted less unethical decision making on behalf of one's group for non-leading group members. However, the leader role was shown to weaken, and even reverse, this relationship. This research demonstrates that self-construal influences group-based ethical decision making but that the nature of this influence is moderated by social role.

Keywords: Ethics; group-based decision making; interdependent self-construal; leadership; social roles

Ethical decision making and leadership: Merging social role and self-construal perspectives

One source of moral failure in group life stems from people deviating from moral requirements to help their group attain its goals. A number of factors contribute to the confidence people have in the moral permissibility of the means they employ to achieve their group's goals, such as the importance they place on those goals (Hoyt, Price, Emrick, 2008; Price, 2006). Another important factor that can influence this moral decision making is the extent to which people define themselves in terms of their relations with others, or the extent of their interdependent self-construal. The literature suggests that people with high, as opposed to low, interdependent self-construal show an enhanced concern for justice in their interactions with others (Gollwitzer & Bucklein, 2007; Van Prooijen & Van den Bos, 2009). However, the extent to which this component of the self-concept influences the ethical decision making process is likely influenced by one's role in the group. In this research, we merge social role and self-construal perspectives and test the prediction that the influence of self-construal in determining group-based ethical decision making will be weaker for those in a leader role relative to those in a non-leading member role.

Social role theory of leadership

Leaders play a critical role in group life by holding a disproportionate responsibility in both setting goals and inspiring collective action to attain those goals (Chemers, 2000; Hogg, 2001; Hoyt, Goethals, & Forsyth, 2008; Messick & Kramer, 2005). The widely held and shared beliefs about the leader role have given rise to tacit assumptions of what it means to be a leader, or implicit leadership theories (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Forsyth & Nye, 2008). These intuitive theories about the leader role are vast and generally involve establishing and accomplishing group objectives and affecting change. These conceptions regarding the leader role can serve as

powerful guides in determining leaders' decision making and behaviors. 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, & Emrick, 2010).

Consistent with the ample literature demonstrating that people's identities strongly influence their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Leary & Tangney, 2003), the assumptions associated with the leader role can influence how leaders carry out the ethical decision-making process. One way in which this can happen is delineated in Hoyt and Price's social role theory of unethical leadership (Hoyt, Price, & Emrick, 2010; Hoyt, Price, & Poatsy, 2013). This perspective on understanding the potential for unethical behavior on the part of leaders maintains that the obligation of goal achievement associated with the leader role contributes to the over-valuing of group goals and an increased confidence in the moral permissibility of using otherwise questionable means to achieve these goals (Hoyt et al., 2013). Thus, in their effort to attain these important group goals, leaders feel more justified than those in non-leading roles to engage in what is conventionally considered to be unethical behavior. In this paper, we further this social role perspective on leadership ethics by examining the ways in which leadership positions can make it less likely that interdependent self-construal will promote ethical decision making.

Interdependent self-construal

One personal disposition that holds the potential to greatly influence ethical decision making in group contexts is self-construal (Cojuharenco, Shteynberg, Gelfand, & Schminke, 2011). Self-construal refers to the way in which individuals understand themselves in relation to others, and it reliably predicts cognitive, affective, and behavioral differences among people

(Markus & Kitayama, 1991). An independent self-construal stresses distinctiveness and individual uniqueness whereas an interdependent self-construal reflects an emphasis on social relations and interconnectedness with others. Though interdependent and independent self-construals parallel the distinction between collectivist and individualist cultures, respectively (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991), there is considerable variation in self-construal within cultures (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Lai, 1999). Furthermore, although both construals are commonly present in people's self-concepts (the "dual self", Singelis et al., 1999), generally one of the construals consistently dominates thought, feelings, and behavior (Hannover & Kuhn, 2004).

Interdependent self-construal can play an important role in ethical decision making. The interdependent self is marked by a distinct commitment to others who are seen as an extension of one's self (Gardner, Gabriel, Hochschild, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Those high in interdependent self-construal are more sensitive and attentive to other people, and injustices to others are more likely to be experienced as injustices to themselves (Van Prooijen & Van den Bos, 2009). Furthermore, there is an expectation that these relationships with others be respectful and affirm moral values (Brockner, De Cremer, Van den Bos, & Chen, 2005). Research has demonstrated that interdependent self-construal is strongly associated with justice-related concerns, and this kind of interdependence is an important predictor of responses to norm violations and unfairness (Brockner et al., 2005; Brockner, Chen, Mannix, Laung, & Skarlicki, 2000; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Gollwitzer & Bucklein, 2007; Van Prooijen & Van den Bos, 2009). In particular, 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.

Self-construal and ethics: The influence of the leader role

The leader role, as compared with the non-leading group member role, can modify the manner in which self-construal informs ethical decision making in group contexts. Although the self-construal literature suggests that greater levels of interdependent construal will be associated with less willingness to deviate from moral requirements, the obligations associated with the leader role complicate this relationship. As the social role theory of unethical leadership suggests, the leader role can result in an increased confidence in the moral permissibility of engaging in what is conventionally considered questionable means to achieve these goals (Hoyt et al., 2013). Thus, we contend that the leader role can undermine the influence of self-construal on ethical decision making. This prediction is consistent with a long history of personality research. Personality theorists have maintained for some time that robust, disposition-based behaviors can be mitigated as the situational demands increase (Bem & Allen, 1974; Mischel, 1977, 2004; Zaccaro, Gulick, & Khare, 2008). Indeed, ample research shows that dispositions are “situationally hedged, conditional, and interactive with the situations in which they were expressed” (Mischel, 2004; p. 5). Similar to strong situations, the leader role provides individuals with cues and expectations regarding how they should behave in the context. Hence, the prediction that the leader role may override the influence of interdependent self-construal on ethical decision making is consistent with substantial literature in personality psychology.

The Current Research

This research extends our understanding of ethical decision making on the part of leaders by merging social role and self-construal perspectives. This work assesses the moderating impact of group social role (leader or member) as it related to the link between people’s self-construal and ethical decision making. For non-leading group members, as has been found more

generally, greater interdependent self-construal is predicted to be associated with lower levels of willingness to engage in unethical behavior on behalf of their group. In contrast, given the expectation that leaders will attain group goals, leaders' interdependent self-construal is expected to play a less significant role in their propensity to engage in ethically questionable behaviors, specifically, those behaviors that will help them attain group goals. These predictions were experimentally tested across two studies. In this research, participants were assigned to the role of leader or non-leading group member and the association between their interdependent self-construal and unethical decision making was assessed.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Design. One hundred-nine undergraduate students completed this online study with one participant declining to indicate their sex, resulting in a final sample size of 108. All participants were entered into a raffle for a chance to win a small monetary prize (57% female; median age = 20; 77% Caucasian, 6% Asian, 6% African-American, 5% Latino/a). The experiment employed a 2 group (role: leader, non-leading group member) between-subjects design¹.

Procedure and manipulations. After providing informed consent, participants completed a brief proofreading and paragraph writing task. Participants then completed a survey that included a measure of their interdependent self-construal. Next, participants were given a vignette with the instructions to imagine themselves as either 'the leader of' or 'a non-leading member of' a student committee on campus:

Imagine you are the leader of (a non-leading member of) one of several student committees on campus that are competing in order to help develop a new master plan for

the University. You are presented with a group project that involves creating actual plans that could be implemented by the University. The group that develops the best plans will win the competition and earn the opportunity to work alongside the administration during the development of the new master plan.

After reading the vignette, participants responded to questions assessing their willingness to make unethical decisions given the scenario. Finally, participants responded to final demographic questions.

Measures

Participants responded to all scales using a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

Interdependent self-construal. Interdependent self-construal was assessed with Singelis' (1994) 15-item measure. Sample items include "I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments," "My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me," and "I feel good when I cooperate with others," $\alpha=.75$.

Unethical decision making. After reading the vignette participants indicated their response to the scenario on an 6-item questionnaire including "I would be willing to pass on incorrect information to other groups if it gave us a competitive advantage," "I would be willing to engage in what some might say are sneaky tactics," and "I would be willing to do a favor for the experimenter if that meant our group would get special treatment in the competition" ($\alpha=.87$).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the scale means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the study variables. The hypothesis that the leader role will moderate the relationship between

interdependent self-construal and ethical decision-making was tested using Hayes' Process macro (2013). Participant sex (-1 = female; 1 = male) was controlled for in analyses as previous research has shown gender differences in ethical decision making involving relational concerns (Dawson, 1997). In addition, given that willingness to engage in what is normally considered unethical behavior in the service of group goals is associated with perceptions of group deservingness (Price, 2008), participants' responses to the single item "my group deserves to win the competition" were measured and controlled for in this study. Controlling for participant sex (-1 = female; 1 = male) and perceived deservingness, both experimental condition (-1 = member; 1 = leader) and participants' self-construal were entered into the equations along with the two-way interaction term. Significant interactions were further explored using simple slopes analyses performed within levels of experimental manipulation (Aiken & West, 1991).

Interdependent self-construal. As expected, both control variables predicted unethical decision making. Greater levels of perceived deservingness significantly predicted greater willingness to engage in unethical behaviors ($B = .28, p = .001$) and women reported lower levels (marginally significant) of unethical decision making than men ($B = .19, p = .092$). Leader role did not significantly predict ethical decision making but interdependent self-construal did ($B = -.69, p < .001$). Greater levels of interdependent self-construal were associated with lower levels of unethical decision making. Importantly, there was a significant interaction between leader role condition and self-construal ($B = .35, p = .045$; see Figure 1). Tests of simple slopes across experimental condition revealed a significant and strong association between self-construal and ethical decision making in the group member condition ($B = -1.01, p < .001$) whereas the relationship became non-significant for those in the leader condition ($B = -.32, p = .154$). These results demonstrate that for non-leading group members, greater levels of interdependent self-

construal are significantly associated with lower levels of unethical decision making.

Importantly, although those in the leader role show a similar pattern, it is significantly weaker and does not reach statistical significance.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to replicate the findings from Study 1 using an alternative scenario and ethical decision making measure. The first study presented a scenario in which undergraduate participants consider unethical behaviors that would benefit their student group while simultaneously disadvantaging other student groups. In this second study, we use an alternative scenario that does not explicitly identify individuals who would be disadvantaged in the unethical decision making.

Method

Participants and Design. Ninety-three undergraduate students at a small liberal arts university voluntarily participated in and completed the study. Three participants failed to indicate their sex (control variable), resulting in a final sample size of 90. All participants were entered into a raffle for a chance to win a small monetary prize (71% female; median age = 19; 81% Caucasian, 12% Asian, 4% African-American). The experiment employed a 2 group (role: leader, non-leading group member) between-subjects design.

Procedure and manipulation. After providing informed consent, participants completed a survey that included a measure of their interdependent self-construal. Next, participants were given a vignette with the instructions to imagine themselves as either ‘the leader of’ or ‘a non-leading member of’ a community organization. They were asked to take a minute to think of themselves in this role and then completed the general unethical decision making measure.

Finally, participants were presented with an ethical dilemma. Participants were asked to consider the following scenario:

Consider that your organization recently received a monetary prize for being one of the most successful organizations in the nation. In order to receive the prize money you had to agree to use it in a way that is 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.

Participants were then asked to respond to the scenario-based unethical decision making measure and the final demographic questions.

Measures

Participants responded to all measures using a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

Interdependent self-construal. Interdependent self-construal was assessed with the same 15-item measures used in Study 1 ($\alpha=.75$; Singelis, 1994).

General unethical decision-making measure. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they feel justified to engage in ethically questionable behavior to attain their group goals on 6 items. Sample items include "I would be justified in misrepresenting the facts in order to preserve the integrity of my organization," "I would NOT be justified in making decisions that could potentially harm other organizations while benefitting my own organization (reverse)," and "In order to achieve the goals of my group, I would be justified in acting in defiance of laws, regulations, standards, and business codes if it is certain that no one will find out." This scale was highly reliable ($\alpha=.91$).

Scenario-based unethical decision-making measure. After reading the ethical dilemma participants indicated their response to the scenario on 10 items including “I would be justified in using the money the way I see best fit to serve my organization,” “I would use the money to support my organization’s goals,” and “In this circumstance, I would misrepresent the facts regarding how I spent the money” ($\alpha=.92$).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the scale means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the study variables². The hypothesis that the leader role will moderate the relationship between interdependent self-construal and ethical decision-making was tested using Hayes’ Process macro (2013). Both dependent variables were analyzed in a similar manner. Once again, participant sex (-1 = female; 1 = male) was controlled for in analyses. Experimental condition (-1 = member; 1 = leader) and participants’ self-construal were entered into the equation along with the two-way interaction term.

General unethical decision making. Once again, participant sex (control variable) predicted decision making ($B = .48, p = .002$) in that women reported significantly lower levels of unethical decision making than men. Neither interdependent self-construal nor experimental condition significantly predicted responses. However, there was a significant interaction between condition and self-construal on unethical decision making ($B = .46, p = .028$; see Figure 1). Tests of simple slopes across experimental conditions reveal a significant and strong association between self-construal and unethical decisions in the group member condition ($B = -.62, p < .032$) but the relationship is non-significant for those in the leader condition ($B = .31, p = .31$). These results demonstrate that for group members, more interdependent self-construal is associated with lower levels of unethical decision making. However, not only was the

relationship no longer significant for leaders, but the direction of the relationship between these variables was reversed: interdependent selves predicted unethical decision making by leaders on behalf of the group.

Scenario-based unethical decision making. A similar analysis was conducted on responses to the ethical scenario. Again, participant sex (control variable) significantly predicted responses ($B = .33, p = .024$) such that women report lower levels of unethical decision making than men. Neither interdependent self-construal nor experimental condition significantly predict responses, but there is a significant interaction between condition and self-construal ($B = .58, p = .006$; see Figure 2). Tests of simple slopes across experimental conditions reveal a significant association between self-construal and decision making in the group member condition ($B = -.58, p = .042$) and a reversed association (although not conventionally statistically significant) for those in the leader condition ($B = .57, p = .063$). These results reveal that for group members, interdependent self-construal is associated with lower levels of unethical decision making but that for leaders the relationship is reversed. For leaders, greater levels of interdependent self-construal is marginally associated with greater levels of unethical decision making.

In sum, this second study provides additional support for the prediction that the leader role will moderate the relationship between interdependence and unethical decision making. In line with expectations from the self-construal literature (Gollwitzer & Bucklein, 2007; Van Prooijen & Van den Bos, 2009), higher levels of interdependent self-construal was associated with lower levels of willingness to engage in unethical behavior on behalf of one's group- but only for non-leading group members. Leaders' interdependent self-construal, on the other hand, was not significantly associated with the generalized measure of unethical decision making and only marginally associated with the scenario-based measure. Importantly, the direction of this

relationship was positive for leaders; that is, greater interdependence was associated with a greater propensity to engage in ethically questionable behaviors to help attain their group goals. These findings suggest that the group-focused expectations associated with the leader role may shift the interdependence-based attention to the needs and goals of the group. One result is a greater willingness to engage in ethically questionable behavior that will ultimately benefit the leader's group.

General Discussion

There is great intuitive appeal to the idea that we can attribute ethical behavior on the part of leaders to their enduring dispositions. A less intuitive notion is that the social role expectations of leaders can alter the relationship between these dispositions and ethical decision making. This research merges intrapersonal and social role perspectives by showing how the leader role can moderate the effect of self-construal on ethical decision making. Across both studies, as predicted from the self-construal literature (Gollwitzer & Bucklein, 2007; Van Prooijen & Van den Bos, 2009), interdependent selves were associated with less unethical decision making by non-leading members of groups. However, interdependent self-construal did not significantly reduce unethical decision making for those in the leader role. In the first study, the role of leader lessens (to non-significant levels) the negative relationship between interdependent selves and unethical decision making found in individuals in non-leading roles. Furthermore, in the second study not only was the leaders' interdependence not significantly associated with unethical decision making, but the direction of the relationship between interdependent self-construal and unethical decision making reversed.

These findings suggest that the leader role focuses the moral regard associated with interdependent self-construal on the group, not on others more generally. As we might expect,

the attention and concern that interdependent selves show others is not indiscriminant (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Indeed, attention to others is “highly selective and will be most characteristic of relationships with “in-group” members” (p. 229). This feature of interdependent self-construal may allow for leaders’ predispositions to care about relational and communal needs to be highly circumscribed and more strongly focused on their immediate group. Furthermore, our results suggest that the extent to which the unethical behavior is seen as adversely impacting others can moderate the extent to which the expectations associated with the leader role influences the relationship between interdependence and unethical decision making. When it was clear that the behavior would adversely impact others in a larger ingroup, the leader role merely weakened the relationship between interdependence and ethical decision making. However, when there was no clear ‘victim’ of the unethical behavior, the leader role altered the relationship: greater interdependence was associated with a greater willingness to engage in that behavior that will ultimately benefit their group.

This research makes a number of important and unique contributions to the literature. It contributes to the nascent literature on the social role perspective on understanding the foundations for unethical behavior on the part of leaders (Hoyt et al, 2010; Hoyt et al., 2013). Although research into the ethical failures of leaders is not new, most of the extant literature focuses on self-serving, as opposed to group-serving, ethical failures (Rus, van Knippenberg, Wisse, 2010). However, benefitting others beyond the self can also be a strong motivator of unethical behaviors (Wiltermuth, 2011). The social role perspective draws attention to the fact that the group-serving expectations associated with leadership can contribute to unethical decision making. The current research contributes to this literature by merging it with an intrapersonal, self-construal perspective. Despite the fact that interdependent self-construal is

ordinarily associated with an enhanced concern for social obligations, norms, and justice, for those in the leader role it can be associated with a willingness to engage in unjust behavior on behalf of one's group.

The current findings also complement in important ways the social cognitive approach to personality by supporting the view that the expression of dispositions is situationally qualified (Mischel, 1977; 2004). This research extends our understanding of situational influences on the expression of dispositions to include the role one occupies within a group: leader or non-leader. By showing that one's role in the group can re-direct the expression of self-construal in terms of its capacity to predict ethical decision making, this research contributes to the science of individuals that is focused on examining person-situation interactions (Mischel, 2004). The expression of dispositions is dependent not only upon self-construal but also on the expectations, appraisals, and goals associated with the leader role. This finding opens up many avenues for future scholarly research.

The current findings also contribute to the growing literature focused on understanding the important role of self-construal in predicting ethical decision making and behavior (Cojuharenco, et al., 2011). Although research has shown that interdependent self-construal is associated with enhanced concern for moral values, normative behavior, and fairness (Brockner, et al., 2005; Brockner, et al., 2000; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Gollwitzer & Bucklein, 2007; Van Prooijen & Van den Bos, 2009), and that *relational* self-construal (the part of the self-concept associated with the psychological relationship between the self and others) is associated with a lower likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior (Cojuharenco, et al., 2011), the current research adds an important caveat to our understanding of the role of self-construal in ethics. Importantly, the findings that the leader role can weaken or even reverse the beneficial ethical

effects of interdependent self-construal should give us pause when we hear calls to make aspects of self-construal more salient in an effort to regulate ethical behaviors (Cojuharenco, et al., 2011).

As with any empirical research, there are limitations to our methodological approach. Our results may be limited in their generalizability, particularly in regards to our reliance on undergraduate students as well as the use of the hypothetical vignettes. The concerns regarding undergraduate student samples are somewhat assuaged by the research showing that these samples are useful for understanding psychological processes and they have been shown to produce similar results as adult samples (Greenberg, 1987; Locke, 1986). Additionally, there is research to support the contention that hypothetical scenarios are relevant to actual ethical lapses in behavior. For example, research has shown that participants' tendency to justify their unethical actions predicts unethical behavior (Gino & Ariely, 2012) and unethical intentions have been shown to predict actual behavior relevant to the measured intention (Detert, Trevino, Sweitzer, 2008).

In sum, the expectations and assumptions associated with the leader role can influence how leaders navigate the ethical decision-making process. The current research demonstrates the great utility in merging both intrapersonal and social role perspectives when attempting to understand the ethics of decision making in group contexts. This research has demonstrated that the extent to which people define themselves through their relations with others, or the extent of their interdependent self-construal, can promote ethical decision making, but the influence of self-construal on their decisions is ultimately moderated by their social role. Interdependent selves predicted less unethical decision making on behalf of one's group for non-leading members of groups. However, the leader role changed the nature of this relationship. With their

moral regard focused squarely on their group, leaders' interdependence was associated with relatively less reluctance, or perhaps even greater willingness, to engage in ethically questionable behavior to benefit their group. Research that seeks to understand the interaction of variables that influence decision making in the leader role holds valuable implications for helping leaders make better decisions and avoid ethical failures. Rather than relying on conventional wisdom about the selfish motives behind unethical leadership, this research substantiates calls for greater appreciation of the lengths to which leaders sometimes go to help their group attain its goals.

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Footnotes

¹Because self-construal, like other types of schemas and beliefs, is seen as both stable and enduring over time (Singelis, 1994) as well as a temporarily accessible situational-level construct (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009), an attempt was made in this study to prime participants' self-construal by employing pronoun tasks asking participants to

circle pronouns (we/us [interdependent] or I/me [independent]) in a brief story and use these pronouns in a short writing task. Analyses revealed that the manipulation was ineffective in altering participants' self-reported interdependent self-construal and results do not significantly differ when this is included as a control variable. Thus, the failed priming will not be discussed further.

²The general unethical decision making measure was somewhat positively skewed with skewness statistics at 1. A square root transformation was successful in decreasing the skewness and analyses with the transformed variable yield results similar to those with the untransformed scores. For ease of interpretation, analyses are presented with the untransformed data.

Table 1

Study 1: Scale Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

Variable	M	SD	1	2
Study 1				
1. Interdependent self-construal	4.88	.66		
2. Unethical decision making	2.81	1.26	-.31***	
3. Participant sex			-.05	.34***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Note: -1 = female; 1 = male

Table 2

Study 2: Scale Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
Study 1					
1. Interdependent self-construal	4.73	.63			
2. Unethical _{General}	2.46	1.31	-.13		
3. Unethical _{Scenario}	3.17	1.28	-.05	.77***	
4. Participant sex			-.14	.32*	.25*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Note: -1 = female; 1 = male

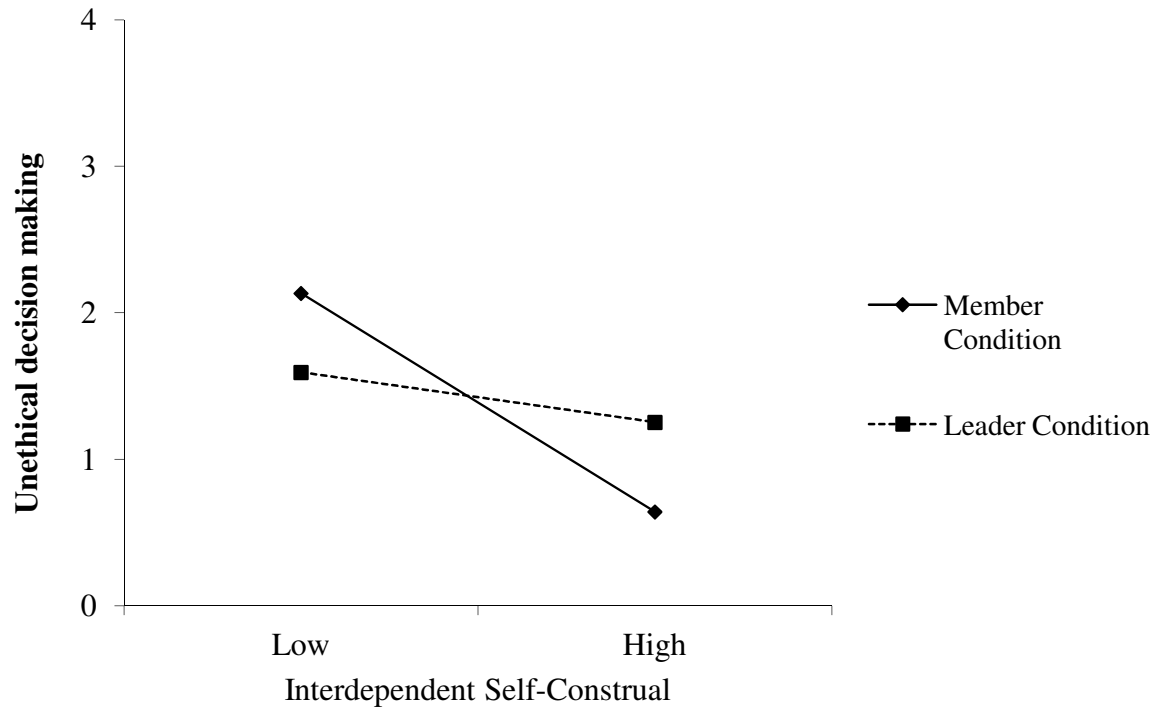


Figure 1. Study 1: Moderating role of leader role in the relationship between interdependent self-construal and unethical decision-making.

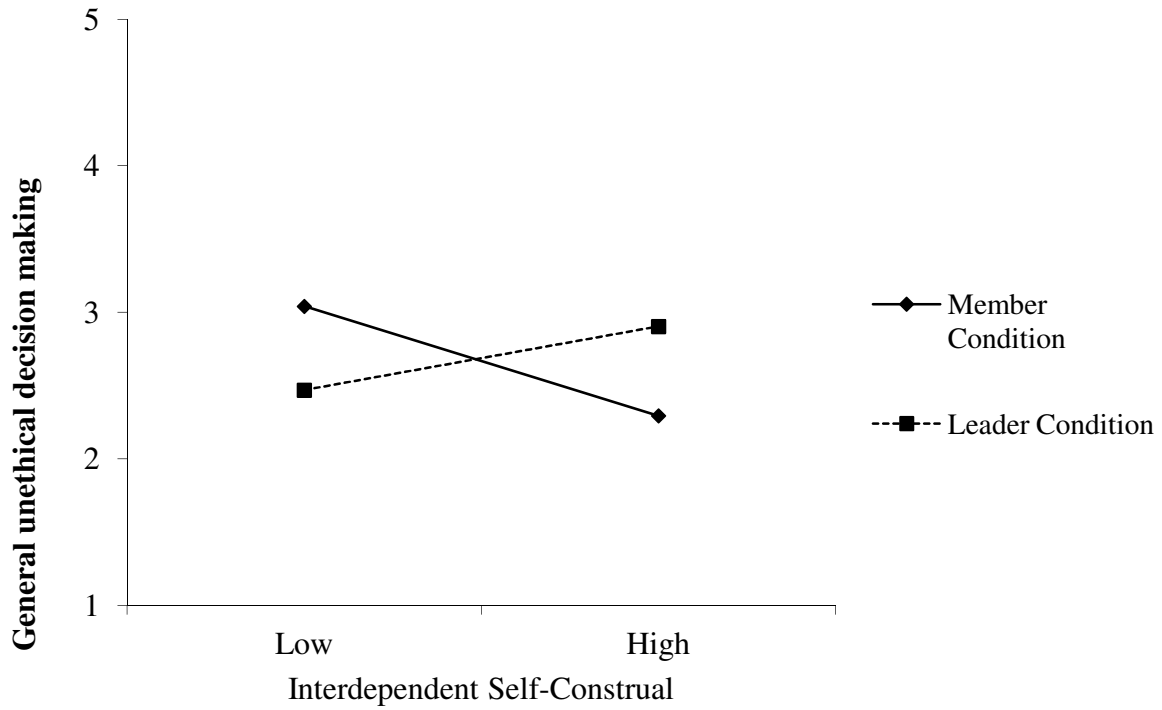


Figure 2. Study 2: Moderating role of leader role in the relationship between interdependent self-construal and general ethical decision making.

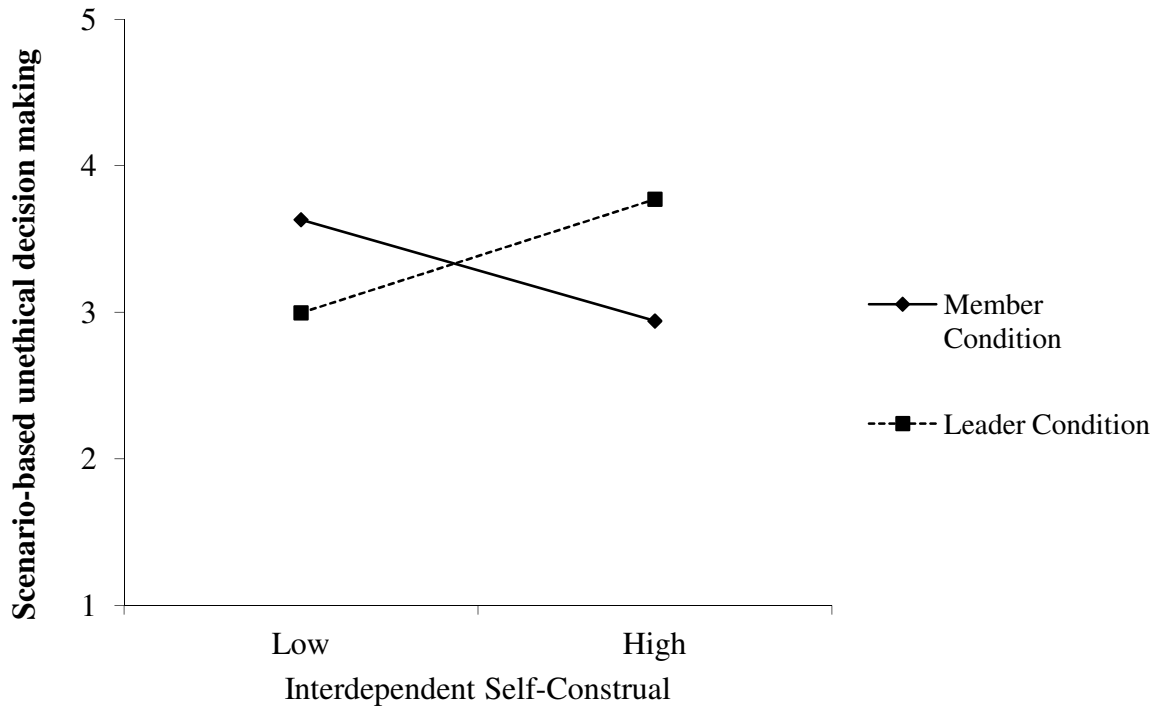


Figure 3. Study 2: Moderating role of leader role in the relationship between interdependent self-construal and scenario-based unethical decision-making.