Abstract

All normative leadership theories suggest that disciplining followers that transgress moral norms is a crucial leadership task. However, leaders sometimes yet fail to do so. Previous research has indicated that leaders may refrain from enacting discipline out of self-interest or from concern for the organization's interest. We explore another option: leaders may simply be unwilling to enforce moral norms because of a negative attitude towards them. We argue and show that leaders that construe norms on relatively low (i.e. concrete) levels are likely to see norms as annoying obstacles, whereas leaders that construe moral norms on high (i.e. abstract) levels will have a more positive view of norms. In line with this, high construal level leaders are likely to be willing to enforce moral norms through discipline in response to follower moral transgressions. Low construal level leaders, in contrast, actively avoid doing so. We show this effect in different contexts and for different types of leader discipline.

Keywords: leader disciplinary behavior, leader cognition, construal level theory, intentionality.

Getting it Done and Getting it Right: Leader Disciplinary Reactions to Followers' Moral Transgressions are Determined by Leader's Construal Level Mindset

During the Italy vs Uruguay match at the 2014 football world cup in Brazil, Uruguayan star striker Luis Suárez bit his opponent, the Italian defender Giorgo Chiellini, in the shoulder (BBC.co.uk, June 25, 2014). Asked about the event a few hours later, the Uruguayan manager Óscar Tabárez commented "this is a football world cup, not about morality" (Borden, June 24, 2014). Tellingly, Tabárez refrained from disciplining his pupil, and even went as far as resigning from his position within FIFA (football's governing body) over a ban issued as a result of the incidence (Sky Sports, June 28, 2014). Underlying Tabárez's reaction is an apparent unwillingness to enforce moral norms in response to this incident. This example shows us that leaders may sometimes go as far as to actively avoid disciplining a follower when that follower transgresses a moral norm. Why does this happen? The answer, we suggest, is found in how leaders understand, or 'construe', moral norms.

Moral norms can be construed in one of two ways (Beauchamp, 2003): some people may perceive a moral norms as a guideline for appropriate behavior in a situation, but for others, it can be nothing more an annoying restriction on their freedom of choice (Adorno, 2000). This has obvious consequences for leader disciplinary behavior: a leader who finds moral norms to be annoying obstacles is less likely to be willing to enforce them by enacting discipline. In contrast, a leader who sees moral norms as positive guidelines is more likely to be willing to do so. Encouraging moral follower behavior is a crucial leadership task (Ciulla, 2004). It is therefore important to understand what factors determine whether leaders enforce moral norms or not. Basing ourselves on construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) we argue that low (i.e., concrete) construal is associated with an adverse attitude towards moral norms, whereas high (i.e., abstract) construal is associated with a positive view (Hunt, Kim, Borgida, & Chaiken,

2010). This has the result that low construal level leaders actively avoid enacting discipline in response to follower moral transgressions, whereas high construal level makes leaders actually want to enact discipline in response to such transgressions.

Focusing on a cognitive phenomenon like leader construal level in this way helps opening the 'black box' of leader cognition and its relation to an important leader behavior: leader discipline (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). There are obvious normative and theoretical consequences that follow from our argument. First, stimulating moral follower behavior has been argued to be at the very heart of 'good' leadership (Ciulla, 2014). Our framework helps to understand why leaders may yet avoid doing so. Second, failing to enact discipline when it is needed has been shown to have negative influences on followers' sense of justice and their support for the leader (Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010). Avoiding to enact sufficient discipline in the wake of follower misbehavior may therefore undermine a leader's effectiveness also in other domains. Finally, leaders' failure to act in line with moral obligations has been argued to result from the influence of leader self-interest (e.g., Cramwinckel, De Cremer, & van Dijke, 2013; Maner & Mead, 2010), or from concerns about the organization's interest (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003). We argue, however, that even if the leader or the organization do not profit from a follower's moral transgression, the leader may still avoid enacting disciplinary responses in situations where he or she is, in fact, morally obliged to do so.

Theoretical background

The moral obligations of leadership

It is increasingly recognized that the job of organizational leaders involves much more than motivating followers towards optimal performance and safeguarding the bottom line (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Leaders also have *moral* obligations, such as setting the right example and treating followers in a fair and just manner (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Van Houwelingen, Van

Dijke, & De Cremer, 2014). These moral obligations follow from a normative perspective on leadership (Gini, 1997), but they also have pragmatic justification. Ethical leadership has been shown to be associated with desirable follower outcomes, such as extra-role behaviors and employee satisfaction (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011; Toor & Ofori, 2009). However, little is known about how leaders themselves view moral norms and obligations.

Broadly, a moral norm can be viewed in two ways (Adorno, 2000). On the one hand, moral principles allow us to tell 'right' from 'wrong', they may inspire us to behave in morally accorded ways, and they may be seen to provide the fabric of social life (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). In other words, moral obligations and norms can be seen as positive guidelines, inspiring us to be best version of ourselves (or aspire to be). At the same time, people may have a decidedly more negative attitude towards moral norms (Beauchamp, 2003; Leiter, 2014): moral norms restrict freedom and may be impediments to reaching certain aims. Indeed, if a moral norm did not rule out certain types of behavior as immoral, it would hardly be able to function as a moral norm in the first place. Understanding moral norms as positive guidelines or as annoying obstacles understandably has substantial influence on the willingness to enforce them.

Leaders are people too. However, the moral obligations of leaders extend beyond those of regular employees (Sims & Brinkman, 2002): leaders are responsible for inspiring followers to behave in morally appropriate ways (Ciulla, 2014). One of the ways of doing so is by enacting discipline in response to follower moral misbehavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Disciplining morally transgressing followers is clearly morally mandated (Gini, 1997), but – at the same time – it has been shown that leaders experience it as unpleasant and time-consuming (Treviño, 1992). When leaders view moral norms and obligations as positive guidelines for behavior, they will be motivated to enact discipline when a follower transgresses a moral norm; they are, after all, morally obligated to do so. However, when leaders view moral norms as annoying obstacles, they

are much less likely to be willing to enforce them by enacting discipline. Rather, they are likely to actively avoid enforcing moral norms.

In sum, how a leader enacts discipline in response to morally misbehaving followers depends on how they view and understand, or 'construe' moral norms and obligations. According to construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), there are fundamentally two levels at which people construe information: low (i.e., concrete) and high (i.e., abstract). This phenomenon is directly relevant to our problem at hand as low construal implies an adverse attitude of moral norms and obligations, and high construal a positive one.

Construal level and leader discipline

Construal level is a fundamental cognitive phenomenon and refers to the level of abstraction by which we mentally represent objects, situations, or people (Burgoon, Henderson, & Markman, 2013). High construal level is an abstract way of representing information. Objects, situations or people construed at a high levels are therefore represented by relatively little, schematic and 'gist-like' pieces of information (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Low construal level is the opposite of that. Objects, situations or people construed at low construal levels are represented by way of concrete, detailed, and peripheral information (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Low construal levels typically involve a stronger focus on the 'here' and the 'now' as much detailed information is relatively fleeting (Liberman & Trope, 2008).

There is some controversy about how construal level affects moral judgments (see e.g., Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008 vs. Gong & Medin, 2012). However, research shows that high construal level facilitates the influence of moral principles on behavior, whereas low construal level impedes this influence (see e.g., Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009; Hunt et al., 2010). This is related to a phenomenon called 'construal level fit' (Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010): people have a preference for information that fits their mindset – abstract information is

seen as more positive when people are in high construal level mindsets, and concrete information is perceived to be more positive when people are in low construal level mindsets (Berson, Halevy, Shamir, and Erez, 2014). Moral principles tend to be relatively abstract: they provide information on what should be done in general, irrespective of specific situations (e.g., the golden rule, the categorical imperative; Hirst, 1934). Because of this, they have a stronger influence when people are in high construal level mindsets. In line with this, Ledgerwood and Callahan (2012) show that high construal level is associated with stronger norm compliance.

While research has provided evidence on the way that high construal level affects the influence of moral principles, much less research has been devoted to the influence of low construal level (Eyal & Liberman, 2010). Yet, we can deduce from the research referred to above that low construal level impedes the influence of moral principles – the abstractness of moral principles does not 'fit' low construal level (Eyal et al., 2008; Hunt et al., 2010). We argue that low construal level not only implies less influence of moral principles on behavior, but actually implies a negative view of such principles.

This latter proposition is supported by several different streams of literature. First, low construal level involves a shorter time-horizon than high construal level (Liberman & Trope, 2007): low construal level therefore implies a preference for what is feasible *now*, rather than what is desirable in the long run (Trope & Liberman, 1998). In line with this, it has been suggested that moral norms and principles 'fade' from one's decision frame when one focuses on the 'here' and 'now' (such as in low construal; Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Low construal level has been shown to increase the influence of 'want' over 'should' (Trope & Liberman, 2000). Moral norms stand in the way of at least some things we might want, and may prohibit at least some things that are feasible in the short run. Low construal level therefore makes moral norms feel more like restrictions. Last,

and most importantly, in addition to construal level fit there is also 'construal level misfit' (Berson & Halevy, 2014): people derive negative value when the abstractness of information does not fit their construal level mindset. For example, Berson et al. (2014) show that abstract, visionary communication is experienced as less motivating, or even demotivating, by those in low construal level mindsets.

Taken together, this all leads us to conclude that leaders in low construal level mindsets have a negative view of moral norms in general and their obligation to enact discipline in response to moral transgressions in particular. Because of this, we argue that they may actively avoid enacting discipline in response to moral transgressions. In contrast, high construal level leaders are mainly motivated by a sense of moral obligation (Eyal et al., 2009); we therefore argue that they enact stronger discipline in response to moral follower transgressions.

This argument results in the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *A high construal level mindset makes leaders respond with discipline to followers' moral transgressions.*

Hypothesis 2: *A low construal level mindset makes leaders actively avoid discipline in response to followers' moral transgressions.*

Integration of arguments and overview of studies

To test these two unique predictions regarding the role of construal level in motivating leaders to use discipline –versus avoid using it –we compared leaders' disciplinary responses to moral transgressions with their responses to transgressions that are not considered moral. To do so, we compared disciplinary responses to *intentional* versus *unintentional* follower transgressions. Only intentional transgressions are viewed as *moral* transgressions (Malle & Nelson, 2003) whereas unintentional transgressions are usually discounted as simple mishaps (Knobe, 2003). Our arguments above should therefore only apply to intentional transgressions.

Low construal level leaders do not avoid disciplining unintentional transgressions. Such transgressions provide information about follower performance: an unintentionally transgressing follower shows he or she is unaware of the rules of the workplace, or indicates a lack of vigilance in upholding these rules (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004). Nor do we expect high construal level leaders to neglect unintentional transgressing followers. After all, caring about morality does not stop one from also caring about performance. We, therefore, do not expect low and high construal level leaders to respond differently to unintentional misbehavior. We do, however, expect them to respond differently to intentional follower misbehavior: high construal level leaders are *more* likely to discipline followers after intentional misbehavior, low construal level leaders are *less* likely to do so.

The same kind of behavior can be displayed both intentionally as well as unintentionally (Leunissen, De Cremer, Reinders Folmer, & Van Dijke, 2013; Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, & Uchiyama, 2008). This allows us to manipulate in our experimental studies whether or not a follower transgressed morally or not by manipulating the intentionality of the transgression. In this paper, unintentional follower transgressions function as a baseline case: We use unintentional transgressions to determine whether construal level makes a leader *less* or *more* inclined to enact disciplinary measures in response to follower moral transgressions.

We tested our argument in three studies. In Studies 1 and 2, both laboratory experiments, we assigned participants to a mid-level management position in a simulated company. In both studies, we used in-basket exercises, a popular tool to assess managerial behavior (e.g., Meyer, 1970; Whetzel, Rotenbury, & McDaniel, 2014) and asked the leader to respond to employee misconduct (see Hoogervorst, De Cremer, & Van Dijke, 2010 for a similar procedure). We manipulated the intentionality of the transgression (Leunissen et al., 2013; Struthers et al., 2008)

and construal level of the leader (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004; McCrea, Wieber, & Myers, 2012) using existing procedures.

Study 3 was a field study among organizational leaders. To increase methodological diversity, we measured chronic individual differences in construal level (Vallacher, & Wegner, 1989). We asked the leaders to recall and describe an instance of intentional versus unintentional employee misconduct (see Leunissen et al., 2013 for a similar procedure) and asked them about their disciplinary actions in the described situation.

Study 1

Method

Participants. One hundred and twenty-six undergraduate students, M_{age} = 21.00; SD_{age} = 2.04; 45 women (35.7 %), participated in return for partial course credit. They were randomly assigned to a 2 (transgression type: intentional vs. unintentional) X 2 (construal level: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedure. We used an in-basket exercise. In-basket exercises are popular ways to assess job performance (Whetzel et al., 2014) and have been used extensively in leadership experiments (Hoogervorst et al., 2010). We told participants that they would be involved in testing a new assessment tool stimulating an actual work environment. More specifically, participants were assigned to a mid-level management position in a company comprising four people: the CEO, a middle level manager (the participant), and two employees (responsible to the participant; see Figure 1). Participants were informed that they would receive messages from other participants and that their task was to respond to these messages. In reality, all messages from both CEO and subordinates were pre-programmed. Hence, we did not use any human confederates in this study.

We further informed participants that they would be working on developing a slogan for a new marketing campaign with their subordinates, and if the campaign was successful, they could

earn up to €10 (approximately $14 at the time of the study). Subordinates were supposed to share any work they did with their supervisor (the participant). However, subordinates could also submit work to the experimenter directly, in which case the team and the participant would not get a share of the potential bonus. This created the possibility for the subordinate to transgress a moral norm. We emphasized that it was the participant's task, as a mid-level manager, to evaluate the quality of the subordinates' work.

---------- Insert Figure 1 about here ----------

While participants were waiting for the first message from their subordinates, we asked them to engage in a short exercise. This exercise actually constituted the construal level manipulation, which was presented to participants as a "mind focusing exercise". We used a procedure developed by Lin, Murphy, and Shoben (1997) to prime construal level mindset. Participants were presented with four sets of objects, which were held constant across conditions. One of the sets, for instance, consisted of a T-shirt, a high-heel shoe, a sandal, and a pair of jeans; another consisted of a Dalmatian (i.e., a breed of dogs), a goldfish, a German shepherd dog, and a hawk. Participants in the high construal level condition were asked to generate functions, uses, materials, and physical characteristics that were *common* to all four objects in each set. Participants in the low construal level condition were asked to name functions, uses, materials, and physical characteristics that were *different* to all four objects in each set. Focusing on communalities induces a focus on overarching categories, and thus a high construal level mindset. A focus on differences induces a focus on lower level categories, and hence a low construal level mindset (Lin et al., 1997).

Immediately after completion of this procedure, participants received a message from one of their subordinates telling them that they had submitted their work themselves and had received € 7.50 (approx. $ 10.50 at the time of the study). In the *intentional transgression condition*, the

employee stated that he or she had done so because (s)he did not want to share the proceeds, and had thus deliberately chosen to bypass the participant. In the *unintentional transgression condition*, the employee stated that (s)he had intended to send the work to the participant, but had accidently pressed the wrong key. In both cases, we made sure the participants understood that their subordinate had, in fact, received money and that they would not be able to recover it (see e.g., Kim, et al., 2004; Struthers et al., 2008, for similar procedures).

At the end of the study, we informed participants that their team had received another bonus, which was to be shared among the team members at the participants' discretion. We emphasized that the team had received this extra bonus based on the quality of their group work. Thus, our participants had at least partly benefitted from their subordinate's misbehavior. The participants were not given the full bonus, thus implying that they could have received an even higher bonus if the transgressing subordinate had not misbehaved.

We then asked participants to indicate whether they would share part of this bonus with the transgressing employee. Whether they decided to do so or not constituted our first dependent variable. Secondly, if they chose to share, we asked how much of the bonus they would allocate to their transgressing subordinate. This constituted our second dependent variable.

Finally, we debriefed the participants and thanked them for their participation. None of the participants objected to the procedures used.

Manipulation checks. Because the Lin et al. (1997) construal level manipulation has so far been used in a limited number of studies only (we know of only two: Fujita & Roberts, 2010; Smith & Trope, 2006), we followed the procedures set out by Fujita and Roberts (2010) to check for the effectiveness of this construal level induction. Specifically, we used a modified version of the Behavioral Identification Form ('BIF'; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) as manipulation check. For each of ten different activities, participants were asked to indicate on a seven-point Likert

scale which of two possible descriptions they preferred for a given activity (e.g., "cleaning the house"). One description referred to a (concrete, low level) means to describe the activity (e.g., "vacuum cleaning the floor"). The other description indicated the (abstract, high level) superordinate goal of the activity (e.g., "showing one's cleanliness"). We collapsed these ten items into a scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$).

We assessed the success of the transgression-type manipulation with two forced choice questions (yes or no): (1) 'Do you think your subordinate did this intentionally?', and (2) 'Do you think your subordinate intended to follow proper procedure?' (see Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994, for a similar procedure).

Results

Manipulation checks. ANOVA with construal level and transgression type as independent variables and the BIF as dependent variable revealed a main effect of construal level, $F(1, 122) = 4.84$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Participants in the high construal level condition were more likely to prefer the high level, more abstract descriptions of the given activities, $M = 5.37$, $SD = .98$, relative to participants in the low construal level mindset condition, $M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.21$. There was no significant main effect of transgression type, $F < 1$, $p = .69$, nor did we find a significant construal level x transgression type interaction effect, $F = 1.39$, $p = .24$. This indicates that the construal level priming procedure was successful.

We used logistic regression to analyze the two binary manipulation checks for the transgression type manipulation. We included both experimental conditions as well as the interaction between the two as independent variables in our model. The full model for the question whether participants believed their employee's transgression was intentional was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 126) = 57.24$, $p < 0.001$. This model revealed a significant main effect for transgression type, $B = -2.97$, $SE = .68$, $Wald(1) = 19.38$, $p < 0.001$, *Odds ratio* = .05,

95% CI for Odds Ration [.01,.19], but no significant effects for construal level, B = .12, p = .84, or the interaction term, B = -.41, p = .68. In the intentional transgression condition, 88.1% of participants agreed that their employee had transgressed intentionally; in the unintentional condition, only 23.9% did so.

The full model was also significant for the second manipulation check, assessing whether participants believed the employee had intended to follow proper procedures $\chi^2(2, N = 126) = 48.69$, $p < 0.001$. As before, we found a significant main effect for transgression type, B = -2.52, SE = .65, $Wald(1) = 14.58$, $p < 0.001$, *Odds ratio:* .08, 95% CI for Odds Ration [.02, .29], but no significant effects for construal level, B = -.09, p = .87, or the interaction term, B = -.11, p = .91. In the intentional transgression condition, 89.8% of participants thought the employee had intentionally not followed proper procedures; in the unintentional transgression condition, only 31.3% of participants thought so. Taken together, these analyses indicate that the manipulation of transgression type was successful.

Hypotheses tests. We tested our hypotheses in two ways: first we wanted to see *whether* the participants decided to share part of the bonus with the transgressing follower. Second, we wanted to test *how much* they shared if they had decided to do so. We were interested in both these questions as both withholding a bonus and sharing relatively little (i.e. withholding part, not all, of the bonus) is a form of discipline.

Our first dependent variable was whether our participants chose to share part of the team bonus with their transgressing employee. In total, 62 out of 119 participants indicated they would do so. Seven observations had missing data and were deleted. To test our hypotheses, we used logistic regression with the main effects of the experimental manipulations and the interaction between the two manipulations as predictors. The full model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 119) = 7.85$, $p = .045$. Furthermore, the difference in χ^2 values between the model with and the

model without interaction term was itself significant (p = .04), which indicates a significant omnibus interaction effect (Jaccard, 2001).

The analysis revealed a significant interaction between construal level and transgression type, B = 2.05, SE = .79, $Wald(1)$ = 6.82, p = .01, *Odds ratio:* 7.77, 95% CI for Odds Ratio: [1.67, 36.24]. Figure 2 depicts this effect. In line with Hypothesis 1, in the high construal level condition, more participants shared their bonus with employees who had transgressed unintentionally (57.6 %) than with those who had transgressed intentionally (32.1 %); *Odds ratio:* .47, 95 % CI for Odds Ratio: [.16, 1.38]. Conversely, and in support of Hypothesis 2, in the low construal level condition, fewer participants shared their bonus with employees who had transgressed unintentionally (44.1 %) than with those who had transgressed intentionally (55.9 %), *Odds ratio:* 2.86, 95 % CI for Odds Ratio: [1.00, 8.20]. We did not find significant main effects for either construal level (p = .55), or for intentionality (p = .17).

----------Insert Figure 2 about here----------

Subsequently, we tested whether the interaction pattern that we found above would also emerge for the *amount* of money (in cents) that leaders shared with their transgressing subordinate (if they decided to share). In other words, we expected leaders with a high construal level mindset to share less money with their subordinate after an intentional transgression than after an unintentional one, and expected the reverse to be true for leaders with a low construal level mindset. This variable is characterized by a truncated distribution (i.e., a distribution clustered on a limiting value, in this case zero; McDonald & Moffit, 1980). Hence, we used tobit regression analysis to analyze this data (Tobin, 1958). Tobit regression uses all the observations of a truncated distributed dataset to estimate a regression line, rather than just the observation with a value above the limiting value, and is therefore preferred when analyzing truncated distributed dependent variables over other techniques that use only the values above (or below)

the limiting value (such as traditional OLS-regression analyses of truncated distributions; Baba, 1990; Leigh, 1985).

This analysis revealed a significant main effect of transgression type, β= - 123.36, *SE* = 50.81, $p = .02$, such that less money was shared with the transgressing subordinate after an intentional, rather than after an unintentional transgression. This main effect of transgression type was qualified by a significant interaction between construal level and transgression type, β = 188.05, *SE* = 68.34, $p < .001$. Figure 3 visually depicts this interaction effect. On average, participants in the high construal level condition shared more money with a subordinate who had transgressed unintentionally, *M* = 94.97, *SD* = 92.71, than with a subordinate who had transgressed intentionally, *M* = 44.23, *SD* = 82.85, though these differences were not statistically significant, $F(1, 116) = 2.01$, $p = .15$. In contrast, participants in the low level condition shared, on average, significantly more money with their subordinate who had transgressed intentionally, *M* = 113.83, *SD* = 109.46, rather than unintentionally, *M* = 74.19, *SD* = 92.08, $F(1, 116) = 5.96$, $p = .01$. All means reported here are in Eurocents.

----------Insert Figure 3 around here----------

Discussion

In sum, participants in the leader role were more likely to enact disciplinary measures in response to *intentional,* rather than *unintentional* subordinate transgressions after having completed a high construal level induction procedure. When participants completed a low construal level induction procedure, we found the opposite effect: participants were *less* likely to enact disciplinary measures in response to intentional, rather than unintentional, subordinate transgressions. Thus, high construal level may, facilitates the expression of moral obligations and norms in leader disciplinary behavior. Low construal level has the opposite effect: these leaders avoid enacting discipline in response to moral follower transgressions.

In Study 1, we focused on employee misconduct that partly benefitted the leader. Yet, we argued that the increased motivation to discipline moral transgressions among high construal level leaders and the motivation to avoid discipline among low construal level leaders should extend to moral transgressions that do not benefit the leader or the organization. Study 2 is therefore essentially a replication of Study 1. Yet, this time we ensured that participants did not benefit at all from their subordinate's misbehavior.

Study 2

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and seventeen undergraduate students (M_{age} = 20.82, *SD* = 1.83; 41 women) participated in this study for partial fulfillment of course credit. They were randomly assigned to a 2 (transgression type; intentional vs. unintentional transgression) X 2 (construal level; high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedure. We used the same procedures as in Study 1. We again used an in-basket exercise in which the participants were assigned to a mid-level management role. However, we used a different procedure to induce construal level mindsets. We used the well-validated "why/how" priming procedure developed by Freitas and colleagues (2004). Participants were invited to ponder either "why-questions" (to induce a focus on higher order goals of action, i.e., a high construal level mindset) or "how-questions" (to induce a focus on the subordinate means by which actions are accomplished, i.e., a low construal level mindset) with regard to a certain activity (e.g., "Why/how do you want to maintain and improve your health?"). This procedure was repeated eight times in each condition, once with "maintain and improve your health" as target, and once with dress well' as target. For example, if a participant in the high construal level condition answered the question "Why do you want to dress nicely?" with an answer such as "to look good", they would be prompted to consider "Why do you want to look good?" In contrast, a

participant who answered the question "How do you want to dress nicely?" might answer "by wearing matching clothes". He or she would then be prompted with the question "How would you go about to wear matching clothes?"

This procedure has been shown to consistently induce high or low construal level mindsets in a large number of studies (e.g., Fujita & Roberts, 2010; McCrea et al., 2012; Torelli & Kaikati, 2009). This is, if people are prompted to consider more abstract information (i.e., superordinate goals) or more concrete information (i.e., subordinate means), the mindset carries over to subsequent tasks (Malkoc, Zauberman, & Bettman, 2010).

We manipulated transgression type in the same manner as in Study 1: participants received a message explaining that one of their employees had either intentionally or unintentionally received money that should have been shared by the team. We specifically stated that they would not get the money back from the transgressing follower, and that the team would not receive a bonus.

Directly after this, we assessed the dependent variable and after that our manipulation checks (to prevent contamination). Finally, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation. None of the participants objected to the procedures used.

Manipulation checks. To test whether the manipulation of intentionality was successful we asked participants to indicate to what extent they thought the transgressing employee (1) had acted in bad faith, (2) had behaved in this way because of a misunderstanding (reverse coded) and (3) had put his or her self-interest above that of the team (all three items measured on a 7-point Likert scale; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). These three items were collapsed into one reliable perceived intentional versus unintentional transgression scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$), with higher scores indicating more perceived intentionality (see Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009, for a similar procedure).

Because the Freitas et al. (2004) construal level induction procedure has been extensively validated in prior work, we decided not to include a manipulation check for the construal level manipulation. The only available check for construal level manipulations is the BIF (Fujita & Roberts, 2010; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), which we also included in Study 1. We were afraid that including the BIF as a check of the Freitas construal level manipulation might lead to hypothesis guessing due to the overlap between the manipulation instructions and the items of the BIF.

Dependent variable. As dependent variable we asked participants to indicate whether they were willing to report the behavior of the transgressing employee to the CEO (i.e., their own boss; 1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much so*).

Results

Manipulation check. ANOVA with construal level mindset and transgression type as independent variables and our three-item manipulation check-scale revealed a significant main effect for transgression type, $F(1,113) = 6.85$, $p < .01$. Participants in the intentional transgression condition were significantly more likely to indicate that the transgression had been committed intentionally, $M = 4.54$, $SD = .75$, than participants in the unintentional transgression condition, $M = 4.15$, $SD = .87$. There was no main effect of construal level, $p = .25$, nor did we find an interaction between the two factors, $p = .26$. This indicates that our manipulation was successful.

Hypotheses test. ANOVA with construal level and transgression type as independent variables and willingness to report the transgressing employee to the CEO as dependent variable revealed the expected construal level by transgression type interaction, $F(1,113) = 9.12$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Figure 4 visually represents the interaction. In line with Hypothesis 1, subsequent simple effects analyses revealed that high construal level leaders were more likely to report the transgressing employee after an intentional, $M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.59$ than after an unintentional

transgression, M = 4.09, SD = 1.76, $F(1,113) = 4.27$, $p = .04$, η^2=.04. In contrast, and in line with Hypothesis 2, low construal level leaders were more likely to report the transgressing employee after an unintentional transgression, M = 4.34, SD = 1.63 than after an intentional transgression, M = 3.39, SD = 1.59, $F(1, 113) = 4.93$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .04$. We did not find a significant main effect for transgression type, $F < 1$, $p > .95$. We did, however, find a significant main effect for construal level, $F(1,113) = 4.80$, $p = .03$, η^2=.04, such that high construal level leaders were, in general, more likely to report the transgressing employee to the CEO, M = 4.52, SD = 1.75, than low construal level leaders, M = 3.92, SD = 1.67.

----------Insert Figure 4 about here ----------

Discussion

In Study 2, we again found a stronger willingness to enact disciplinary measures in response to intentional (rather than unintentional) subordinate transgressions when participants were brought into a high construal level mindset. In contrast, when participants were brought into low construal level mindsets, intentional transgressions were met with *less* discipline than unintentional transgressions. Moral rules are viewed as guidelines under high construal level, but perceived as frustrating impediments under low construal level. This causes that low construal level leaders actively aim to avoid discipline in response to transgressions of moral norms.

Study 3

We conducted Study 3 with two major aims in mind. First, wanted to provide empirical evidence that our results generalize to leaders' responses to employees' violations of moral norms in real work organizations. Second, we wanted to provide a stringent test of our argument across our studies, using several different operationalization of construal level. We therefore focused on individual differences in construal level mindset rather than priming it. Theoretically, individual differences in construal level have similar effects compared to situationally induced levels of

construal (Trope, & Liberman, 2010; Vallacher, & Wegner, 1989). In this study we set out to test that.

Method

Design. The design involved an assessment of construal level (as a continuous independent variable) and an experimental recall manipulation of transgression type (intentional vs. unintentional).

Respondents. We used Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) to recruit our respondents. AMT is an online community designed to bring providers of relatively small tasks in contact with workers willing to execute them. We invited one hundred and twenty participants, seven of which failed an attention check at the beginning of the study, and were subsequently removed from the study (see Oppenheimer, Mayvis, & Davidenko, 2009 for this procedure). We therefore included 113 respondents in the main study. Using AMT as a source for reliable data from a non-student population (Buhrmeister, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) has recently been gained popularity among organizational researchers (e.g., Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013; Uhlmann, Heaphy, Ashford, Zhu, & Sanchez-Burks, 2013). AMT is also an effective way to recruit organizational leaders (Van Houwelingen et al., 2014).

Of the 113 respondents, 40 were female (35.4%); the average age was 32.81 years (*SD* = 9.14) respondents. All respondents held paid employment at the time of the study and held at least a middle or lower level management position in their respective organizations (i.e., they supervised at least one other employee). On average, participants supervised 23.19 employees (*SD* = 92.04). Eighty-three (37.5 %) respondents held a graduate degree; 35 (31 %) held a post-graduate degree (PhD, MBA or equivalent); 25 (22.1%) had completed undergraduate education only, and five respondents (4.4 %) had a high school degree only. On average, respondents had 9.6 years of experience working in jobs of at least 12 hours per week (*SD* = 8.44) and worked, on

average, 42.9 hours per week (*SD* = 10.10). Respondents indicated to have been working at their organizations for an average of 5.53 years (*SD* = 4.40) and had held their job for an average of 4.20 years (*SD* = 3.11). Respondents were paid $ 0.85 for their participation in the study.

Procedure. Following procedures used by Leunissen et al. (2013), we asked half of our respondents to recall a situation in which a subordinate "unintentionally did something you felt was wrong or unjust". The other half were asked to recall a situation in which a subordinate "intentionally did something you felt was wrong or unjust". In both conditions, we asked respondents to recall the event "as vividly as possible" and they were prompted to consider the following questions: "What happened exactly? What did [your subordinate] say or do? What did you say or do? How did it make you feel?" Allocation to either one of these conditions was on a random basis. Twelve respondents failed to describe a situation, and ten others either wrote about an intentional transgression in the unintentional condition or vice versa. These respondents were removed from the dataset, leaving a final *N* of 91. There were no significant differences between the removed respondents and the others on any of the demographic variables.

Control variable. To alleviate concerns that recalled intentional transgressions are more severe than unintentional transgressions, we measured transgression severity using an item from Leunissen et al. (2013). We asked respondents to indicate "To what extent did you feel that you were harmed by your subordinate?"

Measures. We used a subscale from Dobbins' (1985) validated corrective actions scale to measure leader *discipline.* This scale consists of twelve items describing possible actions available to a leader after a follower transgression, divided over four subscales. Respondents are asked to indicate to what extent they find a given action appropriate. We used the punishment subscale (three items: "terminate contract", "provide written reprimand", "decrease pay"; Cronbach's $\alpha = .64$) since this was closest to our purposes (the other subscales describe offering

support and sympathy, training and monitoring). This Cronbach α coefficient is quite similar to those found in previous studies (e.g., Dedrick & Dobbins, 1991; Dobbins, 1985).

We measured *dispositional construal level* with the BIF developed by Vallacher and Wegner (1989). This is by far the most often used scale to measure dispositional construal level (Hart & Burton, 2013; Freitas et al., 2001; Fujita & Roberts, 2010). It consists of 25 descriptions of actions at an intermediate level of abstraction (e.g., locking the door, picking an apple). Respondents are asked to indicate which of two re-descriptions, one relatively concrete (e.g., putting the key in the lock, pulling an apple from the branch), the other relatively abstract (e.g., securing the house, getting something to eat) they find more fitting. Higher scores on this scale represent a relative preference for abstraction and lower scores a preference for concreteness.

Results

Transgression severity. Regression of transgression severity item on the BIF, the intentionality manipulation and the interaction between the latter two revealed no significant interaction effect, β = .03, *SE* = .11, *t*(90) = .26, *p* = .79. Nor did we find a significant main effects for intentionality, β = -.40, *SE* = 2.01, *t*(90) = 0.20, *p* = .84, or for the BIF, β = -.06, *SE* = .07, *t*(90) = 0.96, *p* = .34 and therefore concluded there was no reason to believe that transgression severity was influenced by our manipulation or measurement of the BIF.

Hypotheses tests. Regression of the punishment subscale on the BIF, the intentionality manipulation, and the interaction between those two variables revealed a significant interaction effect, β = -.13, *SE* = .06, *t*(90) = -2.16, *p* = .03. We did not find a significant main effect of the BIF, β = .03, *SE* = .04, *t* = 0.94, *p* = .35, or a significant main effect of intentionality, β = 1.99, *SE* = 1.09, *t* = 1.84, *p* = .07. Figure 5 depicts the interaction. We used a technique developed by Johnson and Neyman (1936) to further probe this interaction. The advantage of this technique compared to – for example – simple slope analyses, is that it does not require defining arbitrary

moderator values as “high” or “low”. Instead, it identifies the regions of moderator values (BIF values in this case) for which the effect of the independent variable (here: intentionality) is significant, and in which specific direction. We found a significant negative, $p < .05$ (one-sided), effect of intentionality on punishment for BIF values of 5.96 and lower. This indicates, in line with Hypothesis 2, that leaders scoring relatively low on the BIF were less likely to punish intentional than unintentional transgressors. In contrast, we found significant positive relations between intentionality and punishment, $p < .05$ (one-sided), for BIF values above 19.68. This indicates, in line with Hypothesis 2, that leaders who scored relatively high on the BIF were more likely to punish intentional than unintentional transgressions. We report one-sided tests here, as we deal with directional hypotheses.

----------Insert Figure 5 about here----------

General Discussion

Enacting disciplinary measures is often the ‘right thing’ to do (Ciulla, 1995), but it can also be unpleasant and distracting (Treviño, 1992). Our research showed that whether leaders are inclined to deliver discipline in response to moral transgressions depends much on how they view, or construe, moral norms: either as guidelines for behavior, or as annoying obstacles. The former is associated with high level construal, whereas the latter is associated with low construal level. Accordingly, high construal level makes leaders more likely to enact discipline in response to follower moral misbehavior. In contrast, low construal level makes leader actively avoid doing so. In fact, these leaders enact stronger discipline in response to amoral (i.e., unintentional) follower transgressions (compared to intentional follower transgressions).

In all three studies, we used different operationalizations of construal level and studied different ways of enacting disciplinary measures. Specifically, we used two different procedures to induce construal level in Studies 1 and 2, respectively. In Study 3, we measured dispositional

construal level. In Study 1, we gave participants the opportunity to withhold a bonus. In Study 2, participants could report their transgressing subordinate. In Study 3, we measured the willingness to enact several different disciplinary measures. We also used two different research designs: Studies 1 and 2 were experimental laboratory studies for which we recruited business students. In Study 3, we recruited leaders in organizations and employed a quasi-experimental design. Taken together, the results of these studies show support that our predictions hold across different contexts and research designs.

Theoretical implications

Leaders' low construal level mindsets prevents them from enacting discipline when followers transgress a moral norm. Previous studies have shown that when a follower transgresses in a way that benefits the leader or the organization, a leader is less inclined to enact disciplinary measures (Hoogervorst et al., 2010; Sims & Brinkmann, 2003). However, our results show that even when a leader does not benefit personally from a follower's transgression, he or she may neglect to enact disciplinary measures. In this sense, we move beyond a simple dichotomy between self-interest and morality (Hunt et al., 2010). Leadership researchers should recognize that a fundamental cognitive phenomenon such as construal level may cause leaders to fail to uphold their moral duties.

The failure to enact disciplinary measures in response to follower moral transgressions sits uneasily with virtually all normative leadership theories (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Ciulla, 2004). Indeed, it has been argued that morally justified action is at the very core of leadership (Ciulla, 1995). From this perspective, the negative view of moral norms and principles that is associated with lower construal levels directly impairs the ability to lead (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2013). After all, in many cases, responding to follower immoral conduct with at least some form of disciplinary action is the morally mandated course of action (Gini,

1997). Our work therefore indicates that leader low construal level is associated with lower levels of ethical leadership (at least with the disciplinary aspects of ethical leadership).

Our research has also clear implications for the literature on leader discipline. Most extant research on leader discipline has focused on the *consequences* of leader discipline (Ball, Treviño, & Sims, 1992) for follower *performance* (Podsakoff, Bommer, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). With the research reported here, we extend this literature in two ways. First, we focus on *antecedents* of leader discipline. Secondly, we also go beyond the exclusive focus on performance and focus on *moral behaviors* instead. Given the important moral and practical consequences from failing to enact discipline in response moral misbehavior it is imperative that researcher start focusing more on this topic. However, we believe that our framework can be extended towards the broader domain of leader responses to follower behavior as well (e.g. reward). Essentially, construal level theory is a theory about information processing and mental representation. As long as a leader needs to process and respond to information about a follower, construal level theory is potentially relevant.

In fact, construal level theory proven to be an important and versatile theoretical perspective in the intrapersonal and cognitive domains (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Several scholars have already called for further application of this theory to better understand leader cognition (e.g., Popper, 2013 Tumasjan, Strobel, & Welpe, 2008). This call has barely been answered (see Berson et al., 2014 for a recent and notable exception). Construal level is an important phenomenon to study interpersonal processes in general, and leadership specifically, as it directly affects how we understand and respond to relevant information about another person or a situation (Hanges, Lord, & Dickson, 2000). In our case, for instance, we have shown that construal level affects the way we construe moral norms and thus how we apply such norms in our daily working life. This provides a way for researchers to extend construal level theory to the

uncharted terrain of leadership specifically, and interpersonal interaction in general (Burgoon et al., 2013).

Furthermore, scholars have often presumed that people hold a positive view of moral norms and obligations (Haidt, 2008; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Even those that transgress moral norms have been presumed to want to uphold them, but to be lacking in self-control (Balliet & Joireman, 2010), moral awareness (Butterfield, Treviño, & Weaver, 2000), or to have been influenced by certain unconscious affective factors (Gaudine & Thorne, 2001). Our work provides an alternative possibility: people may also have an adverse attitude towards moral norms – they may regard them to be restrictive of their freedom and annoying impediments to gain what they want. Of course, having a positive view of moral rules and norms is not the only reason to comply with them; people also may comply because they fear sanctions (Posner & Rasmussen, 1999), or fear being rejected from their social grouping (Wenegrat, Abrams, Castillo-Yee, & Romine, 1996). However, our work shows that a negative view of moral norms at least has substantial influence on people's willingness to enforce them. The consequences are likely to stretch far beyond the domain of leader discipline. It would be interesting to see, for instance, how these effects shape up for different populations charged with enforcing norms, such as police agents or school teachers.

Lastly, one of our anonymous reviewers provided us with the intriguing suggestion that a negative view of moral norms may also stem from a certain discomfort with morality. People may, for instance, feel uncomfortable with the need to judge others – for instance stemming from a desire to be liked. We do not believe such effects have been at play in our studies, since – for instance – as far as we know construal level does not influence need to belong or any related constructs. However, it seems clear that the assumption that all people at all-time have a positive attitude towards morality needs qualifying.

Practical implications

Leaders are important moral actors within the organization: their actions directly influence the firm's ethical climate (Mulki, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2009) more so than regular employees and they are moral role models for many of their subordinates (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Leaders failing to uphold their moral obligations, therefore, pose an important problem from an organizational and societal perspective, especially when this moral obligation is to enforce moral norms in the wake of follower misconduct. Our research shows that this problem is even bigger than previously thought: leaders sometimes actively avoid doing their moral duty of enacting discipline. This failure is problematic from a normative (Ciulla, 2004) and a practical standpoint – third party follower reactions to leaders that fail to enact sufficient discipline are decidedly negative (Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010). The reason for this is that leaders construe moral norms on a low level, and therefore hold an adverse attitude towards them. It is imperative therefore organizations ensure that leaders see moral norms not as annoyances but as guidelines.

The effect-sizes we found for our tests, particularly those for hypothesis 2 (η^2 = .04 in Study 2, R^2 = XX in Study 3) ranged from medium to small by conventional standards (Cohen, 1992). As is well known, effect sizes may vary substantially from study to study (Aguinis, Beaty, Boik, & Pierce, 2005). In addition, recent research shows that Cohen's (1992) rules of the thumb as regard to "small", "medium" and "large" effect size may almost certainly be too strict: effect sizes actually reported in empirical research tend to be smaller than Cohen (1992) may have envisioned (Bosco, Aguinis, Singh, Field, & Pierce, 2014). Given the fact that we consistently found comparable results in three different studies, using varying operationalizations of construal level and leader disciplinary behavior strengthens our confidence that the totality of evidence supports our claims.

A positive view of moral norms comes with high construal level, a negative view with low construal level. The literature has identified many practically relevant antecedents of construal level (Burgoon et al., 2013). The most important of these is undoubtedly distance: events and objects close by (in space and/or time, among other things) are generally represented at lower levels of construal (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Our results therefore point to the perils of setting short-term targets for lower and middle-level management (Johnson, Garrison, Hernez-Broome, Fleenor, & Steed, 2012). Short-term targets are likely to engender a short-term focus (and therefore a low construal level mindset) among lower and middle managers. These managers are then, by consequence, unlikely to enact disciplinary measures when these are needed most: when followers transgress moral norms intentionally. Hence, to promote the enactment of discipline when it is needed, organizations should allow leaders the relative 'luxury' of being able to disengage from the immediate context.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

Studying leadership processes in lab settings, as we did in this paper, is still somewhat unusual. At first sight, this is understandable: leadership takes place within the complex social arenas that are modern day's organizations; a context that is impossible to emulate in the lab. Yet, lab research has been gaining traction due to its unique ability to study important processes in isolation and to provide evidence of causality (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2002; Hoogervorst et al., 2010). For the relatively intricate topic under investigation here, we felt experimental data provided some distinctive advantages over more traditional survey data. One of these advantages is high internal validity of experimental data (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). Nonetheless, we do recognize that high external and ecological validity are just as important for leadership research (Locke, 1986). We therefore designed our experimental studies to provide a realistic simulation of actual working relationships and a realistic simulation of an engaging job

simulation task (Whetzel, et al., 2014). We also replicated our findings in a field setting using organizational leaders in Study 3. The consistent results across lab (Study 1 and 2) and field studies (Study 3) increase our confidence in the robustness of our results. Nonetheless, more (field) research may be needed to fully establish the ecological validity of our findings.

A further suggestion for further research is related to the moral consequences of construal level. Our results and arguments illustrate how construal level has meaningful consequences for the way leaders understand follower behavior and, by consequence, the choices they make regarding their followers. Under high construal level, moral principles have a stronger influence on leader disciplinary behavior. Our research shows that this makes them more likely to enact discipline if a follower transgresses. On the other hand, it may also make them relatively draconian in the sense that they are likely to disregard extenuating details. Low construal level, in contrast, makes leaders more likely to take a pragmatic view of follower behavior. This may have undesirable consequences in terms of low construal level enacting little discipline in response to followers morally transgressing, but also makes them more susceptible to consider mitigating circumstances. There are therefore certainly boundary conditions to the effect we uncovered. We leave it to future research to explore these further.

Concluding remarks

It is comforting to assume that leaders will want to act upon moral rules under all circumstances, and that any failure to do so is caused by inattentiveness or mistakes. Not so. Leaders (in low construal level mindsets) may also have a decidedly adverse attitude towards moral norms and may be unwilling to enforce them. Effective enforcement of moral rules by organizational leaders therefore requires the ability to construe matters on a higher level.

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