Leader Social Accounts of Subordinates’ Unethical Behavior: Examining Observer Reactions to Leader Social Accounts With Moral Disengagement Language
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RESEARCH REPORT

Leader Social Accounts of Subordinates’ Unethical Behavior: Examining Observer Reactions to Leader Social Accounts With Moral Disengagement Language

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When providing social accounts (Sitkin & Bies, 1993) for the unethical conduct of subordinates, leaders may use language consistent with cognitive strategies described by Bandura (1991, 1999) in his work on moral disengagement. That is, leader’s social accounts may reframe or reconstrue subordinates’ unethical conduct such that it appears less reprehensible. We predict observers will respond negatively to leaders when they use moral disengagement language within social accounts and, specifically, observers will ostracize these leaders. In addition, we predict that observer moral disengagement propensity moderates this effect, such that the relationship between leaders’ use of moral disengagement language within a social account and ostracism is stronger when observer moral disengagement propensity is lower versus higher. Finally, we predict that the reason why observers ostracize the leader is because observers perceive the leader’s social account with moral disengagement language as unethical. Thus, perceived leader social account ethicality is predicted to mediate the interaction effect of leader’s use of moral disengagement language within social accounts and observer moral disengagement propensity on ostracism. Results from an experiment and field study support our predictions. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: social accounts, unethical behavior, moral disengagement language, moral disengagement propensity, ostracism

Leaders are often called upon to account for the ethical misconduct of their subordinates. The communication of these negative events to employees is called a social account (Sitkin & Bies, 1993). The language conveyed in these social accounts affects how observers react to leaders. For example, in 2012, a trader at JP Morgan was accused of covering up a series of derivatives trades that cost the company at least $6.2 billion dollars (Khimm, 2012). The CEO of JP Morgan, Jamie Dimon, downplayed the scandal’s significance, calling it “a complete tempest in a teapot” (Fitzpatrick, Zuckerman, & Rappaport, 2012; Kopecki, Moore, & Harper, 2012). A U.S. Senate subcommittee tasked with evaluating the trades chastised Dimon’s handling of the situation. Ultimately, Dimon received a 50% pay cut as a result of the scandal (Summers, 2013).

We develop a theoretical model of observer reactions to a particular type of leader social account: leader social account with moral disengagement (MD) language. Bandura (1991, 1999) described MD as the process of using cognitive strategies to reframe immoral behavior as more appropriate. Bandura outlined a variety of strategies individuals may use to minimize unethical acts. We argue that leaders may explain a subordinate’s unethical behavior using language consistent with MD strategies. MD language conveys that a leader is diminishing the ethicality of the subordinate’s unethical behavior, and minimizing the importance of moral principles. We predict observers will respond negatively to leaders who use MD language in their social accounts about an employee’s unethical behavior because such accounts are inconsistent with moral principles. In addition, we predict that individual differences in MD propensity—the tendency to use MD strategies...
when facing decisions with ethical import (Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012)—will moderate the effects.

Our research offers several contributions. Research has shown that social accounts often contain different rationales (Sitkin & Bies, 1993). MD research could be useful in specifying the different types of rationale that leaders employ in their social account. Although leaders have a diverse array of rationale that they may draw upon in their social account, social accounts that include language consistent with MD strategies may be particularly informative given the tendency for individuals to use these strategies in their own moral reasoning. We add to the social accounts literature by highlighting that social accounts could contain language that references MD strategies, and that these social accounts elicit negative observer reactions.

Our work contributes to the MD literature. Previous research focused on MD as an internal process that motivates unethical behavior (e.g., Kouchaki & Smith, 2014). We depart from this tradition by theorizing that MD strategies can be embedded in the language leaders use in their social accounts and that observers perceive these leader social accounts with MD language as unethical. Accordingly, we expand the phenomenology of MD to a social context—observers evaluating leader social accounts with MD language—which offers researchers a new way to conceptualize and analyze MD in language.

We also contribute to the literature on observer reactions to unethical behaviors (cf. Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005; Treviño & Ball, 1992) by demonstrating that leader social accounts with MD language and MD propensity influence observer reactions. Research has shown that individual differences influence observers’ reactions to others’ unethical behaviors (e.g., Brennan & Skarlicki, 2004; Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015). We add to the literature by exploring the role that MD propensity plays in observers’ reactions to leader social accounts.

**Theoretical Overview**

**Leader Social Accounts With MD Language on Ostracism**

Observers expect leaders to maintain moral principles in the workplace (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). By observers, we mean third-party individuals who may not be directly affected by a coworker’s unethical behavior or by the leader’s response but who are made aware of the behavior and who take an interest in the leader’s response (Treviño, 1992, p. 650). When employees behave unethically, observers look to leaders to provide a social account of the behavior (Mulk, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2009). Leader social accounts that align with moral principles, such as those that reference fairness (Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003), generally elicit positive observer reactions because they uphold observers’ expectations (Schweitzer & Gibson, 2008).

Leader social accounts, however, may contain ethically questionable language that attempt to make the unethical conduct appear less reprehensible. MD theory provides a useful framework for understanding ethically questionable language in leader social accounts. MD theory (Bandura, 1991, 1999) outlines eight strategies individuals use to reframe unethical behavior to make it appear less unethical. The strategies may be used independently or in combination with one another (Bandura, 1991; Bandura et al., 1996). Three MD strategies may try to make the unethical act appear less wrongful: moral justification (framing unethical acts as serving the greater good), euphemistic labeling (describing unethical acts in a way that diminishes their severity), or advantageous comparison (comparing unethical behavior to other unethical behaviors). Three MD strategies may try to remove agency associated with the act: displacement of responsibility (attributing responsibility to others), diffusion of responsibility (dispersing responsibility across others), or attribution of blame (blaming others for causing the unethical act). Finally, two MD strategies may try to minimize harm caused to victims: distortion of consequences (minimizing the seriousness of the behavior) or dehumanization (describing victims as undeserving of basic human consideration).

MD language can be present in explanations of unethical behaviors. Reynolds, Dang, Yam, and Leavitt (2014) found that participants who lied used MD language when explaining their unethical behavior in writing. We theorize that when providing a social account for a subordinate’s unethical behavior, leaders may use language consistent with MD strategies. Leader social accounts with MD language include language that removes or diminishes the unethical content of unethical behavior. For example, in response to rape allegations of a woman kicker by fellow teammates, the University of Colorado football coach blamed the victim by disparaging her playing ability, stating “It was obvious Katie wasn’t very good. She was awful . . . she was not only a girl, she was terrible” (Associated Press, 2004). In another example, Enron leaders used euphemistic labels, “taking advantage of arbitrage opportunities,” when describing Enron traders’ power trading scandal, which prompted power outages in California (Oppel, 2002). These examples suggest that leaders may use language consistent with MD strategies in their social accounts of unethical acts. We categorize these social accounts as leader social accounts with high MD language. Leader social accounts that have no or low levels of MD strategies are considered leader social accounts with low MD language.

Previous research has shown that individuals may use MD strategies when engaging in unethical acts (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). Even though observers might use MD strategies to justify their own misdeeds, we expect that observers will have negative reactions to leaders who use language consistent with MD strategies in their social accounts. Theory on moral hypocrisy suggests that individuals are more likely to hold others responsible for their moral wrongdoings than they would themselves (Batson, Kobrnowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997). That is, when judging others’ behaviors, individuals are more likely to be highly punitive of others’ behaviors than when judging their own behaviors. Indeed, individuals evaluate others’ moral transgressions more harshly than their own identical moral transgressions (Valdesoslo & DeSteno, 2007; Valdesoslo & DeSteno, 2008). Individuals also generate more excuses when describing their own transgressions compared to others’ transgressions (Krebs & Laird, 1998). On the basis of the research cited in the preceding text, we expect observers will react negatively toward leaders whose social accounts contain high rather than low levels of MD language.

Observers who react negatively to leader social accounts may wish to punish the leader in some way (Shapiro, 1991; Sitkin & Bies, 1993). We investigate observer ostracism. **Ostracism** is de-
fined as ignoring, shunning, or excluding another person (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008) and represents a lack of a desire to cooperate with another person (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009). Research has shown that ostracism is a reasonable form of leader punishment because of its subtlety (O’Reilly, Robinson, Berdahl, & Banki, 2014). Indeed, employees are more likely to engage in subtle acts of punishment toward leaders like ostracism (e.g., ignoring the leader, avoiding contact with the leader, refusing to talk with the leader), compared with other overt forms of punishment (Tepper, Mitchell, Haggard, Kwan, & Park, 2015).

Given its goal (i.e., punishment) and subtlety, ostracism is a likely observer reaction to leaders whose social accounts contain MD language. Leader social accounts with MD language signal the leader’s acceptance of the subordinate’s unethical behavior, thus violating observers’ expectations that leaders will maintain moral principles in the workplace (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Leader social accounts with MD language also signal to observers that the subordinate is not being held accountable for the unethical behavior and that the leader is not taking steps to protect others from harm that may befall them from the misdeed (Bies & Tripp, 1995). Comparatively, leader social accounts that do not minimize the subordinate’s unethical behavior relay that the leader is maintaining moral principles and holding the subordinate accountable. We propose the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** Leader social accounts with MD language will be positively related to observer ostracism of the leader.

### The Moderating Role of Observer MD Propensity

Research by Moore et al. (2012) found that individuals can differ in their tendency to cognitively disengage from moral principles when facing ethical issues, and this individual difference is termed MD propensity. Individuals who are higher in MD propensity are more likely to use MD strategies when facing ethical decisions and are less attentive to issues of ethics in general because of their chronic disposition to disengage from moral principles. Those who are lower in MD propensity, in contrast, are more attuned to the ethicality of actions and less likely to use MD strategies. Consistent with these ideas, research has found that MD propensity is positively related to unethical behavior (Kouchaki & Smith, 2014; Moore et al., 2012).

Because moral principles are less salient to observers with a higher MD propensity, they are less likely to detect differences between leader social accounts that contain high or low levels of MD language. Thus, for those higher in MD propensity, ostracism of the leader may be less likely to vary on the basis of the leader’s use of MD language in their social accounts. Conversely, observers lower in MD propensity are more sensitive to moral principles and, consequently, more attuned language that violates moral principles. Leader social accounts high in MD language diminish the ethicality of the subordinate’s unethical behavior. Observers lower in MD propensity should be likely to punish leaders who use MD language in their social accounts by ostracizing them, as ostracism could demonstrate that the leader’s dismissive explanation was unethical and signal the need for the leader to conform to moral principles and standards of leadership (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown & Treviño, 2006). Our reasoning suggests the following:

**Hypothesis 2:** The relationship between leader social accounts with MD language and observer ostracism of the leader will be stronger when observer MD propensity is lower rather than higher.

### Perceived Ethicality and Reactions to Leader Social Accounts With MD Language

Research suggests that observer reactions to social accounts are influenced by observers’ perceptions of the information relayed in the account (Bobocel & Farrell, 1996; Ployhart, Ryan, & Bennett, 1999; Shapiro, 1991; Skarlicki, Ellard, & Kelln, 1998). Observers search for informational cues within accounts to determine the account’s appropriateness (Bies, Shapiro, & Cummings, 1988). Thus, the content within the account is informative and influences observer reactions. We theorize that observers’ perceived leader social account ethicality mediates the relationship between leader social accounts with MD language and ostracism. By perceived ethicality, we mean the degree to which observers perceive the leader’s social account as aligning with generally accepted moral principles. Moral principles involve behavioral prescriptions that define and direct individuals toward honesty and virtuousness (Moore & Gino, 2013). What is considered unethical violates accepted moral principles (e.g., lying, cheating, stealing; Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014). Leader social accounts with MD language diminish the moral implications of subordinates’ unethical behavior and in so doing are in sharp contrast to moral standards. Thus, observers likely perceive leader social accounts with MD language as unethical, motivating them to punish the leader (i.e., ostracizing the leader).

Moreover, the indirect effect of the Leader Social Accounts with MD Language × Observer MD Propensity interaction should influence ostracism through perceived ethicality. Because observers with a higher MD propensity tend to disengage psychologically from moral principles, they are not likely to perceive differences between leader social accounts that do or do not adhere to these principles. Thus, observers higher in MD propensity will be less likely to perceive differences between these leader social accounts with MD language in terms of ethicality. Conversely, observers with lower MD propensity have a higher sensitivity toward moral principles. Therefore, observers lower in MD propensity are likely to report leader social accounts with MD language as less ethical because of their capacity to detect differences between leader social accounts that do or do not adhere to moral principles.

Perceptions of social account ethicality should compel a corresponding punitive reaction for observers with a lower versus higher MD propensity. If the leader’s social account is perceived as ethical for those lower in MD propensity, this signals observers’ approval of the account, which would motivate positive observer reactions. If the leader’s social account is perceived as unethical by those lower in MD propensity, this represents observers’ disapproval of the account, motivating these observers to punish the leader with ostracism. We predict the following:

**Hypothesis 3:** Leader social accounts with MD language will indirectly influence observer ostracism of the leader through perceived leader social account ethicality, and this effect will be stronger when observer MD propensity is lower rather than higher.
Study 1

Procedure and Sample

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at University of New Mexico (No. 848273, Study Title: Moral Disengagement). We recruited 142 students from a university in the Southwest to participate in the study in exchange for credit toward a course research participation requirement. To examine the reliability of the data, we included items to detect careless responders, which resulted in 31 participants being dropped from the study (Meade & Craig, 2012). A total of 111 participants were included in the final sample (Mage = 23, SDage = 7.28, 48% women; 39% White).

Participants completed the study in groups of four to six people. Participants were told that they were completing a multipart study about leadership experiences. In Part 1, participants wrote an essay about a time when they were a leader and had to deal with a challenging situation involving another person they were leading. This was done to set up the experiment in Part 2. In Part 2, participants were presented with another student’s essay to review. In actuality, the researchers constructed the essay that participants reviewed. To make it appear as though another student’s essay was being randomly chosen by the computer system for the participant to review, participants saw a wait screen with a continuous circle being randomly chosen by the computer system for the participant to review, participants saw a wait screen with a continuous circle to indicate that the essay was loading. Once loaded, participants read the student’s essay and answered questions about it. To enhance realism regarding participants’ future interaction with the student leader, participants were instructed that in Part 3, they would be participating in a team task that might be led by the student whose essay they reviewed in Part 2. In reality, no students participated in the team task.

Leader social account with MD language was manipulated in Part 2. Participants read an essay in which a student leader described witnessing a subordinate stealing. In the high leader social account with MD language condition (n = 53), the account included language that minimized the unethical act (e.g., “Other employees may act in a manner similar to Person X—one employee took an entire wardrobe,” consistent with advantageous comparison). In the low leader social account with MD language condition (n = 58), the account included language that did not minimize the unethical act (e.g., “Most employees do not act in a manner similar to Person X,” in contrast to advantageous comparison; see Appendix A for manipulations). After participants read the essay, we measured observer intent to ostracize the student leader.

After participants completed Parts 1 and 2, they were directed to an ostensibly different study where we measured participants’ MD propensity. Participants were told that this study was unrelated to the leadership experiences study that they just completed. This new study was given a different study name, and participants had to reenter their participation code to access this study. We did this to create psychological separation between the MD propensity measure and the measure of our criterion variables (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Measures

Observer MD propensity. We assessed MD propensity with Moore et al.’s (2012) 8-item measure. Observers rated their agreement on their general tendency to morally disengage (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly; Appendix B lists all items).

Intent to ostracize the leader. Intent to ostracize the leader was assessed with nine items from Ferris et al.’s (2008) ostracism measure. The items were adapted to indicate observers’ intent to engage in behaviors in which they excluded the leader. The instructions reminded participants that the student leader may be the leader of the team task that they would be engaging in. Participants were further instructed to imagine what it would be like working under that student leader in this task, and rated their intended engagement in the listed behaviors (e.g., “Leave an area that he/she just entered”; 1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely).

Controls. Research has shown that moral identity and demographic variables influence observers’ reactions to unethical situations (Jennings, Mitchell, & Hannah, 2015). Thus, we controlled for observer age, gender (men = 1, women = 2), and moral identity using Aquino and Reed’s (2002) 5-item internalization measure (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Because observers may infer that the leader’s motive for using MD language was due to concern for the employee, we controlled for perceptions of leader concern for the employee using three items adapted from De Dreu and Nauta (2009). Participants rated whether they perceived the leader’s response was due to the leader being “Concerned about the needs and interests of the employee,” “Concerned about the goals and aspirations of the employee,” or “Focused on the wishes and desires of the employee” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Results

Manipulation check. We used a 7-item measure of leader social account with MD language as our manipulation check.1 Participants evaluated the extent to which the student leader’s social account included MD language (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; see Appendix C for all items). A confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) using SPSS AMOS 22.0 showed an acceptable fit to the measure, \( \chi^2(df) = 19.97(11), p < .05; \) Confirmatory Fit Index (CFI) = .98, Non-normed Fit Index (NNFI) = .96, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .08, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = .03; Bollen, 1990). A t test showed a significant effect of condition on our manipulation check, such that individuals in the high leader social account with MD language condition reported the student leader communicated higher levels of MD language (M = 5.24, SD = .96) compared with those in the low leader social account with MD language condition (M = 2.55, SD = .90), t(109) = −15.19, p < .001, 95% CI [−3.04, −2.33].

Descriptive statistics and correlations. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics, correlations, and coefficient alphas of the study’s variables.

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1 Because some participants in Study 2 described events that did not have victims, we did not create an item for dehumanization for this measure. To remain consistent with Study 2’s measure, we used the same 7-item measure used in Study 2 in Study 1 as the manipulation check. If we used the 8-item measure, which included an item for dehumanization, the manipulation check results in Study 1 remained consistent: high leader social account with MD language condition (M = 5.34, SD = .92), low leader social account with leader MD language (M = 2.51, SD = .90), t(109) = −16.29, p < .001, 95% CI [−3.17, −2.48].
Table 1

Study 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Intent to ostracize the leader</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>(.88)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Leader social account with MD languagea</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Observer MD propensity</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>(.76)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Genderb</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Age</td>
<td>23.72</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Moral identity</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.18†</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.17†</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>(.85)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Leader’s other-concern</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.18†</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>(.83)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 111. Coefficient alpha values are shown in parentheses along the diagonal. MD = moral disengagement.

a 0 = low leader social account with MD language, 1 = high leader social account with MD language. b 1 = man, 2 = woman.
1 p < .10. † p < .05. ** p < .01.

Hypothesis testing. An analysis of covariance revealed that the leader social account with MD language manipulation had a significant direct effect on intent to ostracize the leader. Supporting Hypothesis 1, observers in the high leader social account with MD language condition reported higher levels of intent to ostracize the leader (M = 2.08, SE = .07) compared with those in the low leader social account with MD language condition (M = 1.73, SD = .06), F(1, 102) = 12.46, p < .01, η² = .11, 95% CI [−.54, −.15].

We used hierarchical regression to test the moderating effects of MD propensity. Measured variables were mean-centered to interpret the interaction, and the interaction was plotted in Figure 1 at high and low levels (+/−1 SD) of the moderator (Cohen et al., 2013). Results show that the leader social account with MD Language Manipulation × Observer MD propensity interaction term was significant on observer intent to ostracize the leader (b = −.28, p < .05; see Table 2). Supporting Hypothesis 2, simple slope analysis revealed that the relationship between leader social accounts with MD language and observer intent to ostracize the leader was stronger when observer MD propensity was lower (b = .58, p < .001) than higher (b = −.01, ns).

Discussion

Results from this study provided initial support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Observers lower in MD propensity had higher intentions to ostracize leaders whose social account contained high versus low levels of MD language. Interestingly, for observers lower in MD propensity, intent to ostracize rose to equivalent levels of ostracism reported among observers higher in MD propensity. This suggests that for observers lower in MD propensity, the differences between a leader’s social account with high versus low levels of MD language was particularly salient. However, those higher in MD propensity reported relatively stable (and high) levels of intent to ostracize and were not influenced by the MD language within the social account. Still, Study 1 did not provide the opportunity to examine the process by which leader social accounts with MD language affects observer behaviors (Hypothesis 3). We address this in Study 2.

Figure 1. Study 1: Leader Social Account with moral disengagement (MD) Language × Observer MD Propensity interaction on observer intention to ostracize leader.
Table 2
Study 1 Hierarchical Regression Results for Intent to Ostracize the Leader

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
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<th>Step 2</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control variable</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>-0.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender a</td>
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<td>.10</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral identity</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leader’s other-concern</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td>Predictor variable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leader social account with MD language b</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observer MD propensity</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator variable</td>
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<td>Leader social account with MD language × Observer MD propensity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td></td>
<td>.17</td>
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<td>.21</td>
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<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
<td>.04</td>
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</table>

Note. N = 108. We tested and interpreted hypotheses using unstandardized regression coefficients. MD = moral disengagement. 
a 1 = man, 2 = woman. b 0 = low leader social account with MD language, 1 = high low leader social account with MD language. 
*p < .05. **p < .01.

studied were included in our analyses (M_{age} = 35, SD_{age} = 10.69; M_{years work experience} = 12, SD_{years work experience} = 9.72; 62% women; and 61% White).

Measures

**Leader social account with MD language.** Leader social account with MD language was assessed with Study 1’s manipulation check measure. Participants rated the extent to which the social account in their critical incident included MD language (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

**Perceived leader social account ethically.** To assess perceived leader social account ethically, participants evaluated if the social account in the critical incident was ethical, appropriate, legal, and unethical (reverse-scored; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

**Ostracism of the leader.** Ostracism of the leader was assessed with the same nine item measure used in Study 1. Participants rated the extent to which they engaged in the listed behaviors toward the supervisor they wrote about (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

**Observer MD propensity.** We assessed observer MD propensity with the same measure used in Study 1 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

**Controls.** As with Study 1, we controlled for age, gender, moral identity, and leader’s concern for employee using the same measures as in Study 1. Study 2 had participants react to a variety of coworker unethical actions, which could vary in ethicality. We therefore controlled for the perceived ethicality of the coworkers’ actions, with six items (ethical, moral, appropriate, legal, consistent with behavioral rules or norms, and unethical [reverse-scored]; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). We also controlled for similarity with the leader, with two items (“The supervisor and I have similar personalities” and “The supervisor and I are alike in a number of areas”). Because research has shown that explanation medium (also called form of communication, Shapiro, Buttner, & Barry, 1994) and how observers hear about the event (Bisel & Messersmith, 2012; Hill & Boyd, 2015) influence observer reactions to social accounts (DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985; Sitkin & Bies, 1993), we controlled for social account delivery method with two dummy coded variables (1 = over the phone, 0 = other; 1 = in person, 0 = other) and social account source (1 = directly from the supervisor, 0 = other).

Results

**Descriptive statistics and correlations.** Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics, correlations, and coefficient alphas of the study’s variables.

**Measurement model testing.** We conducted a CFA using SPSS AMOS 22.0 to evaluate the variables’ distinctness. The measurement model consisted of items from four latent variables (leader social account with MD language, observer MD propensity, perceived leader social account ethically, and ostracism of the leader). The four-factor measurement model was a better fit to the data compared with alternative models (see Table 4; Schumacker & Lomax, 1996).

**Hypothesis testing.** Linear regression showed that leader social account with MD language had a marginally significant direct effect on ostracism of the leader (b = .14, p < .10), partially supporting Hypothesis 1 (results reported in Table 5).

To test Hypothesis 2, predictor variables were mean-centered, and the predictions were tested using hierarchical regression. The

---

2 Supplemental analyses tested the idea that observer perceived similarity with the leader affected ostracism. Results demonstrated that the Observer Perceived Similarity × Leader Social Account with MD interaction was not significant on observer ostracism of the leader (b = −.15, p < .05). On the basis of control variable analysis protocol (Becker, 2005; Carlson & Wu, 2012), we report only the hypothesized moderator.
Table 3
Study 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ostracism of the leader</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>(.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Leader social account with MD language</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.87*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Observer MD propensity</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Perceived leader social account ethnicity</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Gender</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Age</td>
<td>35.01</td>
<td>10.69</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Moral identity</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.34</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Perceived ethicality coworker’s behavior</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Similarity with the leader</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>-.49**</td>
<td>-.36*</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.54*</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>(.92)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Leader’s other-concern</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>(.90)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Hear direct from leader*</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Leader responded via phone*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Leader responded in person*</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>-.40**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 95. Coefficient alpha values are shown in parentheses along the diagonal. MD = moral disengagement.
* 1 = man, 2 = woman.  † 1 = heard directly from leader, 0 = other.  ‡ 1 = leader responded to coworker’s behavior via phone, 0 = other.  § 1 = leader responded to coworker’s behavior in person, 0 = other.  
** p < .05.  *** p < .01.

Leader Social Account with MD Language × Observer MD Propensity term was significant on observer ostracism of the leader (b = -.15, p < .05; see Table 5). Figure 2 shows the plotted interaction at higher and lower levels (+/−1 SD) of the moderator (Cohen et al., 2013). Simple slope analysis reveal the Leader Social Account with MD Language × Observer MD Propensity interaction was stronger when observer MD propensity was lower (b = .28, p < .01) than higher (b = -.03, ns), supporting Hypothesis 2.

To test Hypothesis 3, we examined the Leader Social Account with MD Language × Observer MD Propensity interaction term on perceived leader social account ethnicity. The interaction was significant (b = .17, p < .05), and simple slope analysis revealed that the relationship was stronger when observer MD propensity was lower (b = -.61, p < .01) than higher (b = -.27, p < .05; see Figure 3, see Table 6). We then tested the mediated model, using a SPSS macro with 1,000 resamples (Hayes, 2012). Results indicated that perceived leader social account ethnicity was negatively and significantly related to ostracism of the leader (b = -.22, p < .05), and leader social account with MD language indirectly influenced ostracism through perceived social account ethnicity (indirect effect = .10, boot SE = .05, boot CI [.01, .23]). Finally, we tested the full moderated mediation model, using the SPSS macro. Results (see Table 7) show that observer MD propensity moderated the relationship between leader social account with MD language and observers’ perceived social account ethnicity and that perceived social account ethnicity mediated the path from leader social account with MD language to observer ostracism. The aforementioned relationships were significant except for observers with the highest MD propensity (95th percentile). Altogether, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the effects from Study 1, showing that leader social accounts with MD language had a marginally significant positive effect on observer ostracism of the leader and that MD propensity significantly moderated this effect. Study 2 extended the model to test for the mediating effects of perceived ethicality (Hypothesis 3). Results supported the full model, showing that the reason why observers react with ostracism to leader social accounts with MD language is because they find the social account unethical, and that these effects were stronger when observer MD propensity was lower (rather than higher).

Table 4
Study 2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Δχ²</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>NNFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>SRMR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-factor (all items combined)</td>
<td>1462.53</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>870.49</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-factor*</td>
<td>899.99</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>307.95</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-factor*</td>
<td>747.13</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>155.09</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-factor*</td>
<td>869.72</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>277.68</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-factor*</td>
<td>592.04</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 93. All chi-square values are significant at p < .05. MD = moral disengagement. CFI = Confirmatory Fit Index; NNFI = Non-normed Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.
* Model constrains leader social account with MD language and MD propensity.  † Model constrains leader social account with MD language and perceived leader social account ethnicity.  ‡ Model constrains leader social account with MD language and ostracism of the leader.  § Model is the hypothesized model of all latent variables (leader social account with MD language, MD propensity, perceived leader social account ethnicity, and ostracism of the leader).
In two studies, we find that observers were more likely to ostracize leaders who used social accounts with MD language to describe their subordinates’ unethical behavior. This is because observers found these social accounts unethical, motivating them to engage in behaviors to punish leaders. In addition, our results showed that observer MD propensity moderated this effect. Observers higher in MD propensity reported relatively higher levels of ostracism by observers lower in MD propensity when included high rather than low levels of MD language. Notably, levels of ostracism by observers lower in MD propensity matched levels of ostracism by observers higher in MD propensity when leaders used high levels of MD language in their social accounts. Thus, observers lower in MD propensity are unlikely to ostracize leaders (all things equal) until presented with a leader social account that includes high MD language.

General Discussion

In two studies, we find that observers were more likely to ostracize leaders who used social accounts with MD language to describe their subordinates’ unethical behavior. This is because observers found these social accounts unethical, motivating them to engage in behaviors to punish leaders. In addition, our results showed that observer MD propensity moderated this effect. Observers higher in MD propensity reported relatively higher levels of ostracism (Figures 1 and 2), which suggests that those higher in MD propensity have a general tendency to engage in ostracism regardless of the use of MD language within the social account. This is unsurprising given that ostracism is a behavior that shows disregard for others, and those higher (vs. lower) in MD propensity have a greater tendency to engage in unethical behavior (Moore et al., 2012). Whereas those higher in MD propensity exhibited relatively high and stable levels of ostracism, observers lower in MD propensity were significantly influenced by the use of MD language in social accounts. Observers lower in MD propensity were more likely to ostracize leaders when their social accounts included high rather than low levels of MD language. Notably, levels of ostracism by observers lower in MD propensity matched levels of ostracism by observers higher in MD propensity when leaders used high levels of MD language in their social accounts. Thus, observers lower in MD propensity are unlikely to ostracize leaders (all things equal) until presented with a leader social account that includes high MD language.

[Figure 2. Study 2: Leader Social Account with moral disengagement (MD) Language × Observer MD Propensity interaction on observer ostracism of the leader.]

[Figure 3. Study 2: Leader Social Account with moral disengagement (MD) Language × Observer MD Propensity interaction on perceived leader social account ethicality.]
Control variable

Predictor variable

Our study contributes to the literature in important ways. First, our research extends the literature on social accounts, which has shown the value of including within social accounts (a) ethically oriented language (e.g., Leonard, Mackie, & Smith, 2011; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008; Wohl, Hornsey, & Bennett, 2012), and (b) multiple types of explanations (Bies, 1987; Bies & Sitkin, 1992; Sitkin & Bies, 1993). Our conceptualization of leader social accounts with MD language bridges these findings. We show that nested within leader social accounts may be ethically questionable language that diminishes the ethicality of unethical behavior. Thus, our research extends the literature on social accounts, which has depicted MD as an internal cognitive process motivating unethical behavior (Bandura et al., 1996; Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012). We found that MD strategies can be embedded in language used in leader social accounts about subordinates’ unethical behavior and that this language is salient to observers. Accordingly, we expand how MD can be applied to the larger social context (between-person rather than within-person effects).

Second, our research contributes to the MD literature. Previous research has depicted MD as an internal cognitive process motivating unethical behavior (Bandura et al., 1996; Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012). We found that MD strategies can be embedded in language used in leader social accounts about subordinates’ unethical behavior and that this language is salient to observers. Accordingly, we expand how MD can be applied to the larger social context (between-person rather than within-person effects).

Third, our studies contribute to the literatures on observer reactions to unethical situations. Although observers may use MD to justify their own unethical behaviors, our research suggests that observers judge leaders who use high rather than low MD language in their social accounts more punitively. Potentially, this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentile of moderator (Observer MD propensity)</th>
<th>Effect of leader social account with MD language on ostracism via perceived ethicality</th>
<th>Boot SE</th>
<th>Boot LLCI</th>
<th>Boot ULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50th</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75th</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95th</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>-.015</td>
<td>.201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 94. MD = moral disengagement; LLCI = Lower level confidence interval; ULCI = Higher level confidence interval.
means that observers evaluate the content of others’ social accounts differently than they would their own social accounts. Also, research has suggested that observers who witness unethical conduct may respond in ways that are harmful to the organization (e.g., counterproductive work behaviors; see Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005, for a review). We examined a negative and harmful observer reaction: ostracism. Our results suggest that leader social accounts with MD language are met with resistance from observers and lead to ostracism—a behavior that could harm the leader and possibly the organization.

Our research provides practical guidance for organizations. When responding to the unethical conduct of employees, leaders may wish to downplay the ethicality of the behavior to manage impressions and minimize judgment. Our studies suggest that using MD language when describing subordinates’ unethical behavior motivates observers to ostracize the leader. Consequently, it would behoove organizations to train leaders on the ethical implications of social accounts and how to decrease MD language within their social accounts.

Our study has limitations that can be addressed with future research. First, although we focused on negative reactions, research could examine when observers respond positively to leader social accounts with MD language. For example, in high stakes contexts when observers depend on leaders to protect their interests, or when observers benefit from accounts with MD language, observers may find these accounts ethical. Such contexts may involve organizations targeted for a hostile take-over or situations when leaders are discussing out-groups (e.g., competing organization). Further, homophily theory would suggest that if observers have a strong, positive connection to the leader or perpetrator of the unethical behavior, observers may respond positively to social accounts with MD language. For instance, observers’ similarity to the leader might mediate the effects. We examined this possibility in a post hoc supplemental test with the Study 2 data and found that similarity to the leader was not a significant mediator, whereas perceived ethicality was. Nonetheless, research might examine the effects of other associative variables (e.g., identification). Research should also examine how different MD language within social accounts (e.g., euphemistic labeling vs. advantageous comparison) affect observer reactions. In Study 1, our manipulation included all eight MD strategies within the account. Research could examine if observers perceive accounts that contain a subset of MD strategies as more ethical and if some of the MD strategies produce more negative reactions.

Relatedly, future research could examine other factors that motivate negative responses. In Study 1, it is possible that participants in the high leader social accounts with MD language condition responded negatively to the leader because the leader reported the subordinate’s behavior, when at the same time he or she used MD language to excuse the subordinate’s behavior (see Appendix A). Our intent in Study 1 was to isolate the effects of leader social accounts with MD language on observer reaction while keeping the leader’s behavioral response (reporting the subordinate) constant across conditions. Research could examine if observers react more negatively to leaders whose behavioral response misaligns with their social accounts.

Second, in Study 1, we manipulated leader social accounts and focused on measuring ostracism as an outcome rather than exploring the psychological mediator of perceived ethicality. This strategy aligns with Spencer, Zanna, and Fong’s (2005) recommendations, as it is sometimes difficult to measure a mediating process within an experiment because it could prime the psychological mediator for all participants. Yet, this strategy allowed us to test Hypothesis 3 in Study 2’s field study only, limiting our ability to make strong, causal inferences.

Third, we focused on perceived ethicality in mediating the effects of leader social accounts with MD language on ostracism, but we encourage future researchers to examine other mediators and outcome variables. It could be that social accounts with MD language causes observers to question leaders’ trustworthiness or moral character, thereby affecting outcomes. In addition, although we theorized and tested MD propensity as a trait, research has shown that MD propensity could be activated as a state (Lee, Kim, Bhave, & Duffy, 2016; Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper, & Aquino, 2012). It is thus possible for leaders to influence observers’ state MD with their social accounts, making observer state MD a potential mediator between leader social accounts and outcomes. Finally, additional outcomes beyond ostracism could be investigated, such as reactions about the leader (e.g., trust), the organization (e.g., withdrawal), or the coworker who engaged in the unethical acts (e.g., ostracism of the coworker).

Conclusion

Across two studies, we found that observers ostracize leaders who use MD language within their social accounts of subordinates’ unethical behaviors. Further, observers lower in MD propensity were significantly influenced by the use of MD language in the social account, whereas ostracism of the leader for those higher in MD propensity did not vary based on the leader’s use of MD language. Observers’ perceived leader social account ethicality mediated the interactive relationship between a leader’s use of MD language and MD propensity on observers’ ostracism of the leader. Thus, although language consistent with MD strategies may seek to reframe unethical acts as ethically permissible, observers perceive the use of such language in social accounts as less ethical, and ostracize leaders who implement it in their social accounts.

3 We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this future direction.

References


(Appendices follow)
Appendix A

Study 1 Scenario Cover Story and Leader Social Account With Moral Disengagement (MD) Language Manipulations

Participants read the following scenario. High leader social account with MD language appears in text, with low leader social account with MD language [in italics and brackets].

Last summer I was a manager at a clothing store. I really enjoyed interacting with customers and most of my employees. Unfortunately, one Saturday I noticed one of my employees (I’ll refer to this person as Person X) stuffing one of the store’s shirts into a backpack when leaving the store.

I spoke to Person X about it as he or she left. I filled out the appropriate forms for the corporate office detailing the event. Really, Person X’s behavior was clever [unfortunate].

Other employees may act in a manner similar to Person X - one employee took an entire wardrobe. [Most employees do not act in a manner similar to Person X].

The company provides employees with a discount on all items in the store, but the company could pay employees more. So, the company is to blame for Person X taking the shirt. [Regardless, Person X is to blame for taking the shirt].

The retail industry sets up systems to address stealing, which suggests that it is a cultural issue for the organization to consider. This issue is much bigger than the behavior of this one employee. [The behavior of Person X contributes to and detracts from the creation of an ethical culture].

No one was negatively affected by Person X’s behavior, so the act isn’t so unacceptable. [It may seem as though no one was negatively affected by Person’s X’s behavior, but the act violates moral standards and so it is unacceptable].

And lastly, allowing stealing to occur has such an insignificant financial influence on the company’s bottom line. [And lastly, allowing stealing to occur can have a significant negative financial influence on the company’s bottom line].

In fact, the only people who may have been hurt were the owners of the organization, and they make enough money—one shirt cannot hurt their overstocked bank accounts. [In fact, the owners of the organization are people, too, and no one should not take things from others].

Appendix B

Study 1 and 2 Leader Social Account With Moral Disengagement Language Measure

1. Attempted to justify the employee’s conduct in some way. (Moral justification)

2. Found ways for the employee to not be held accountable for his or her behavior. (Diffusion of responsibility)

3. Used others as an excuse for the employee not acting better. (Attribution of blame)

4. Used language that made the employee’s conduct appear less negative. (Euphemistic labeling)

5. The leader compared the employee to someone else to make the employee look better. (Advantageous comparison)

6. Used logic to say the employee’s behavior was not that bad. (Distortion of consequences)

7. Indicated the employee should not be responsible for his or her actions. (Displacement of responsibility)

(Appendices continue)
Appendix C

Study 1 and 2 Moral Disengagement Propensity Measure (Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012)

1. It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about.

2. Taking something without the owner’s permission is okay as long as you’re just borrowing it.

3. Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it’s hardly a sin to inflate your own accomplishments a bit.

4. People shouldn’t be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do.

5. People shouldn’t be blamed for doing things that are technically wrong when all their friends are doing it too.

6. Taking personal credit for ideas that were not your own is no big deal.

7. Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt.

8. People who get mistreated have usually done something to bring it on themselves.

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