On Ethically Bankrupted Leaders: Feelings of Contempt can Disrupt Leaders’ Identity Based Moral Compass

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Abstract
The current rash of corporate scandals has instigated societal and scientific interest in unethical leader behavior. Moral identity has been put forward as an important factor regulating unethical conduct. However, we posit that the self-regulating function of moral identity may be deactivated by contempt, a largely neglected, other-condemning emotion that is inconsistent with the demands of one’s moral identity. In Study 1, we developed and validated a short measure of contempt. In the subsequent series of studies, we indeed found that contempt weakened the negative association between moral identity and the reported probability of displaying unethical supervisory behaviors (Study 2), as well as leaders’ display of abusive supervisory behaviors (Study 3 and 4). These findings suggest that the extent to which leaders are guided by their identity-based moral compass is contingent on their feelings of contempt.

Keywords: unethical leader behavior; abusive supervision; moral identity; contempt
Defined as acts that have harmful effects on others and are “either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community” (Jones, 1991, p. 367), unethical leader behavior incorporates acts ranging from abusive supervision to fraud. The upsurge of media-covered high-profile corporate ethical scandals, such as the LIBOR scandal and the Olympus accounting scandal, has led the general public to conclude that some leaders are ethically bankrupted. Moreover, empirical findings clearly relate unethical leadership to various negative consequences, ranging from unethical behavior on the part of subordinates (for a meta-analysis see Schyns & Schilling, 2013) to leader ineffectiveness (e.g., De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2004). However, the causes of leaders’ ethical derailment are still unclear. Hence, the current study aims to shed more light on what drives leaders to behave unethically, and to refrain from steering by moral compass.

Moral identity, a self-conception that is organized around a set of moral traits (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Reed & Aquino, 2003), is a kind of self-regulatory mechanism that has been shown to activate ethical behavior (e.g., procedural justice enactment; Brebels, De Cremer, Van Dijke, & Van Hiel, 2010) and to inhibit unethical behavior (e.g., lying in a business negotiation; Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009). In general therefore, a salient moral identity is considered to guard leaders from behaving unethically. However, it has been argued that when one’s moral identity is deactivated or not readily accessible, its self-regulating function is hampered, resulting in less ethical behavior even among high moral identifiers (Aquino et al., 2009). So far, the literature on moral identity has mainly focused on the deregulating potential of situational factors (e.g., financial incentives) to explain a lessened impact of individuals’ moral identity on their ethical behavior (Aquino et al., 2009). Yet, if we want to explain why some leaders act in line with their moral identity whereas others do not, even though the circumstances in which they operate are quite similar, a focus on intra-individual factors instead of on situational factors may be particularly helpful.
Previous research indicates that affective states have a profound influence on the extent to which self-regulatory mechanisms operate effectively (cf. Leith & Baumeister, 1996). By calling attention to subjective experiences, prioritizing certain goals, and giving direction to behavior (Bagozzi, Baumgartner, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2000; Frijda, 1986, 2006), emotions can disrupt the accessibility of existing knowledge structures, such as one’s moral identity. In particular, emotions that motivate behavior that is not in line with the self-regulatory demands of one’s moral identity are likely to undermine moral identity’s inhibition of unethical behavior. One emotion that has received little research attention but may be particularly relevant to explaining unethical behavior displayed by leaders in business settings is contempt (Pelzer, 2005).

Contempt is an other-condemning emotion that tends to arise in hierarchical relationships, such as those often found in the work-context (Melwani & Barsade, 2011), and it involves a basic feeling of superiority over others (e.g., Miller, 1997). Based on previous theorizing portraying contempt as a cold emotion that depersonalizes and objectifies the other, making it easier to commit hurtful acts towards others (Izard, 1977), we argue that contempt motivates behavior that opposes moral identity’s self-regulatory demands. Consequently, our main prediction is that leaders’ contempt weakens the negative association between leaders’ moral identity and their unethical behavior.

**Moral Identity**

Mental representations of the self are critical for processing social information and providing guidelines for behavior (e.g., Brown & Smart, 1991; Markus, 1977). Particularly relevant in the context of ethical behavior is one’s moral identity (Blasi, 1984; Damon & Hart, 1992; Erikson, 1964). Moral identity is the mental representation people have about their own moral character. Aquino and Reed (2002) proposed that an individual’s moral identity is a cognitive schema of the moral self that is organized around a set of moral trait associations (e.g., caring, compassionate,
friendly, fair; Aquino & Reed, 2002). This trait-based approach assumes that moral traits are part of a network of connected components that ‘fire together and wire together’ (cf. Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994). The moral self-schema of individuals with a highly central moral identity is activated more strongly and more frequently than the other self-schemas that are part of an individual’s network of self-identities (Higgins, 1989).

Previous theorizing has identified self-consistency as the primary underlying principle responsible for the powerful role of moral identity in regulating ethical behavior (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Aquino et al., 2009). In general, people have the desire to act in a self-consistent manner (Blasi, 1980; 1993; 2004). This internal demand for self-consistency motivates a person with a highly central moral identity to behave in an ethical manner, because that suits the behavioral prescriptions associated with their moral self-schemas. In contrast, for a person with a less central moral identity there are no self-consistency demands that urge towards more ethical and less unethical behavior (Aquino et al., 2009). Hence, the stronger one’s moral identity is, the more powerfully it regulates one’s ethical behavior (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Lapsley & Lasky, 2001; Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008).

Indeed, a growing body of research consistently shows that moral identity motivates ethical behavior (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Brebels et al., 2010) and inhibits unethical behavior (e.g., Aquino et al., 2009; Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Reed & Aquino, 2003). For instance, moral identity has been shown to inhibit cheating behavior (Gino et al., 2011), and to be negatively associated with unethical supervisory behaviors (i.e., lying in a business negotiation; Aquino et al., 2009), self-interested work-behavior (DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceramic, 2012) and anti-social behavior in a sports setting (Sage, Kavassanu, & Duda, 2006). In accordance with these findings we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: Moral identity is negatively associated with unethical supervisory behaviors.
Deactivation of Moral Identity’s Self-regulatory Demands

Social-cognitive models of moral identity suggest that the influence of moral identity on ethical behavior is bounded to its activation (e.g., Aquino et al., 2009). Put differently, defining oneself as a moral person will only motivate ethical behavior or inhibit unethical behavior when the moral self-schema is accessible (i.e., active) within the working self-concept (Skitka, 2003). This opens up the opportunity for factors that deactivate the accessibility of one’s moral identity to weaken its inhibition of unethical behavior. Especially factors that strongly motivate behavior that is not in line with the traits and values that are part of the moral self-schema are likely to undermine moral identity’s negative impact on unethical behavior. For example, Aquino and colleagues (2009) reasoned that situational cues could impair moral identity’s negative impact on unethical behavior via a decreased accessibility of one’s moral identity. In line with their reasoning, they found that even in those whose moral identity is central, a financial incentive stimulated unethical behavior, in this case lying. They explained this finding by arguing that those with a highly central moral identity experienced a psychological dissonant state that was produced by the incompatibility of moral values/goals on the one hand and self-interested values/goals on the other hand. To alleviate this dissonant state individuals deactivate one of the incompatible facets of their identity (Burke, 2003) with the situational factor ‘winning out’ because of its recency of activation (Aquino et al., 2009). In turn, this temporarily deactivation of the moral self-schema weakens its influence on behavior.

Apart from such situational influences, we argue that intra-individual processes may also explain the at times wavering influence of moral identity. It is important to identify these intra-individual processes because it may help us understand why some individuals may ignore their moral compass, while others do not, even though their circumstances may be quite similar. Specifically, the self-regulatory function of one’s moral identity can be losing strength when specific emotional influences motivate behavior that is inconsistent with moral identity’s self-regulatory demands.
Although less black-and-white than previously thought (e.g., Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003; Levine & Pizarro, 2004), emotions, by calling attention to their subjective experience and by prioritizing goals that are associated with the emotion (Zeelenberg, Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Pieters, 2008), can (temporarily) reduce the accessibility of knowledge structures and impair self-regulation. Previous research has shown that particularly negatively valenced emotions like dispositional anger (e.g., Cornell, Peterson, & Richards, 1999), or emotional distress (e.g., Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001) can impair self-regulation. By shifting attention to goals that may potentially conflict with an individuals’ moral identity, the accessibility of one’s moral identity in the working self-concept may be reduced by emotional influences. This may, in turn, impair moral identity’s self-regulating function.

Hence, we argue that the self-regulating role of moral identity in inhibiting unethical behavior could be undermined by negatively valenced emotions; in particular those that guide leaders in the opposite—unethical or abusive—direction. Emotions that are likely to stir unethical behavior towards others are the so-called other-critical emotions, contempt, anger, and disgust (CAD triad; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Other-critical emotions are negatively valenced emotions that are felt for others. Compared with anger and disgust, contempt is a less intense but longer-lasting emotion resulting from a permanent negative evaluation of the target individual (Izard, 1977; Fisher & Roseman, 2007). Given the long-lasting nature of this emotion, it is likely that its deregulating impact on moral identity’s inhibition of unethical behavior will be enduring. Moreover, within this illustrious triad, contempt more so than the other emotions tends to be found predominantly among those who have higher status positions and it arises to a larger extent in hierarchical relationships (Pelzer, 2005). However, to date, little research attention has been devoted to leaders’ feelings of contempt in a work-context (cf. Melwani & Barsade, 2011; Pelzer, 2005).
Contempt

Contempt, a feeling of disdain for or superiority over others (Miller, 1997), is defined as an other-condemning emotion that is often linked to hierarchy and a vertical dimension of social evaluation (Rozin et al., 1999). The facial expression of contempt is characterized by one-sided smirks (Matsumoto & Ekman, 2004), and the experience of the emotion often results in the deterioration of social relationships. Moreover, contempt is associated with a lack of reconciliation intention, dehumanization, and in general a tendency to distance oneself (physically and psychologically) from the recipient of contempt (Fisher & Roseman, 2007).

Indeed, from a social-functionalist perspective (Ekman, 1992; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Keltner, Haidt, & Shiota, 2006) it has been theorized that feelings of contempt serve to increase social distance by means of social exclusion (Fischer & Roseman, 2007) and status reduction of the recipient (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Morris & Keltner, 2000). In turn, it has been argued that it is this social-distancing function of contempt, depersonalizing and objectifying others, that increases the likelihood of committing hurtful acts (Izard, 1977).

Empirical research that directly relates contempt to hurtful or unethical acts is still scarce. One notable exception is the study conducted by Melwani and Barsade (2011) who developed a business strategy simulation in which they tested the interpersonal consequences of receiving contemptuous feedback. The key findings showed that those who received contemptuous feedback responded with higher levels of interpersonal aggression than those who did not receive contemptuous feedback. Moreover, they showed that this effect was mediated by returned feelings of contempt. Although these findings primarily show the consequences of receiving contemptuous feedback, and do not speak to the behavioral consequences of feelings of contempt experienced by leaders, it does suggest that feelings of contempt can motivate more abusive behavior (i.e., interpersonal aggression). As such, we hypothesize that:
Hypothesis 2: Contempt is positively associated with unethical supervisory behaviors.

In accordance with this predicted direct effect, we argue that contempt may represent an emotional factor that motivates behavior (e.g., depersonalization, aggression, racism; Izard, 1977; Melwani & Barsade, 2011) that is inconsistent with the self-regulatory demands of one’s moral identity. Because leaders with a highly central moral identity will tend to have an active moral identity within their working self-concept, the effect of a factor deactivating this moral identity will be more pronounced among those with a relatively high moral identity. Put differently, contempt may particularly deactivate the accessibility of the moral self-schema among leaders with a high moral identity, but would have little influence on leaders with a low moral identity because their moral self-identity is already less active and/or less accessible. We contend that feelings of contempt can reduce the activation of leaders’ moral identity within the working self-concept and, thereby, weaken moral identity’s inhibition of unethical supervisory behaviors. Specifically, our main hypothesis states that:

Hypothesis 3: Contempt moderates the relationship between moral identity and unethical supervisory behaviors such that the stronger the contempt the weaker the negative relationship between moral identity and unethical supervisory behaviors.

Overview of the Present Research

Because multiple-item measures to assess the construct of contempt are lacking, the purpose of Study 1 was to develop a short scale that measures contempt and to assess its convergent, nomological, and discriminant validity. In Study 2, we measured participants’ moral identity and trait-like contempt and then provided participants with scenarios aimed to assess their reported probability to display unethical supervisory
behaviors. In Study 3, we aimed to replicate the findings of our first study and to improve realism by using a sample of organizational leaders and by assessing specific instantiations of leader unethical behavior, namely abusive supervisory behaviors. In Study 4, we measured the moral identity of organizational leaders, and then measured their intentions to display abusive supervisory behaviors towards a subordinate they either had or did not have contempt for. So, instead of relying on a measure of leaders’ trait-like tendency to experience feelings of contempt, in Study 4, we investigated state-like contempt by manipulating whether leaders recall a subordinate for which they had or did not have disdain for.

In line with research indicating that sex may have an influence on our variables of interest (cf. Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007), we used sex as a control variable in all our studies. Moreover, the samples of organizational leaders are characterized by diverse educational backgrounds so that we controlled for educational background in Study 2 and 3 (cf. Mayer, Thau, Workman, Van Dijke, & De Cremer, 2012). In Study 3, we also controlled for anger and disgust to see if our predicted relationships can be found when partialling out the influence of these two variables. Previous research suggests that it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the three other- condemning emotions (i.e., contempt, anger, and disgust; Alvarado & Jameson, 1996; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). By controlling for anger and disgust we aimed to show the effects of disgust-free and anger-free contempt.

**Study 1: Scale Development and Psychometric Analyses**

In Study 1 we evaluated a self-developed five-item measure of contempt (for the specific items, see Table 3.1). Two samples were used to assess the psychometric properties of the developed items. In the first sample, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and examined the convergent, nomological, and discriminant validity of the contempt scale. In the second sample, we aimed to cross-validate the results of the EFA using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).
Chapter 3

Method

Participants and procedure. The first sample consisted of 393 leaders (225 males, 168 females) recruited via the online platform Mechanical Turk. Only respondents holding a managerial or supervisory position with a minimum of three direct subordinates were allowed to participate in the survey. Respondents’ mean age was 33.77 years ($SD = 10.68$) and on average they had held a supervisory position for 5.29 years ($SD = 5.90$). Of the respondents, 29.8% had secondary education (high school), 53.7% had a bachelor’s degree, 12.7% had a master’s degree, 2.8% had an MBA degree, and 1.0% had a doctoral degree. Respondents who had given their informed consent were asked to complete the online survey. Across the entire survey, all items were randomized within their respective scales (Alphas are displayed in Table 3.2). All measures, unless otherwise stated, used 7-point Likert-type scales ($1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree$) to assess participants’ responses.

Convergent validity measure.

Contemptuous facial expressions. A scale shows convergent validity if it is related to an alternative measure of the same construct (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). We are not aware of any preexisting instruments that measure self-reported contempt. Yet, considerable research attention has been devoted to the facial expression of contempt. In order to be able to establish convergent validity, we measured participant’s contempt using four pictures displaying a person with a contemptuous facial expression (two pictures of male faces and two pictures of female faces; Radboud Faces Database; Langner, Dotsch, Bijlstra, Wigboldus, Hawk, & van Knippenberg, 2010). Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statement that the picture gives a good impression about how they feel towards other people.

Nomological validity measures.

Anger and disgust. Nomological validity is shown when a scale correlates in expected ways with theoretically related measures. Since contempt, anger, and disgust are all part of the triad of other-condemning...
emotions (Rozin et al., 1999), we expected that contempt would be positively associated with both anger and disgust. We assessed trait-like anger with the 10-item scale developed by Spielberger (1996), and trait-like disgust with 13 items of Olatunji and colleagues (2007) revised disgust scale.

**Gratitude and empathy.** In contrast to contempt, gratitude and empathy are associated with concern for others (e.g., Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). Therefore, we expected that contempt would be negatively associated with gratitude and empathy. Gratitude was measured with Emmons and McCullough’s (2003) six-item scale, and empathy was assessed with the seven-item perspective taking and empathic concern subscales of Davis’ (1980, 1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index.

**Personality characteristics.** The honesty-humiliation facet of personality was assessed using the sincerity, fairness, greed-avoidance, and modesty subscales of the HEXACO Personality Inventory (HEXACO-PI, Lee & Ashton, 2004). Each of the subscales consists of four items and responses were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). We expected a negative correlation between contempt and each of the subscales. Moreover, we measured respondents’ callousness using nine items of the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU; Frick, 2004; Kimonis et al., 2008) on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all true, 4 = definitely true). We expected a positive correlation between contempt and callousness.

**Discriminant validity measures.**

**Vitality and humor orientation.** A measure demonstrates discriminant validity when a scale is unrelated to measures of conceptually dissimilar constructs. To establish discriminant validity, we measured two concepts that we expected to be modestly related or unrelated to contempt. Vitality was measured with seven items (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; Ryan & Frederick, 1997), and humor orientation was measured with 17 items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991).
Results

**EFA.** A principal-components analysis revealed that a single-factor structure underlies our self-developed five-item scale (see Table 3.1). The items showed high factor loadings, .75 or higher, and the single factor solution explained 69.29% of the total variance.

**Construct validity analyses.** Table 3.2 shows the zero order correlations between all the variables. As expected, the five-item contempt scale we developed showed a strong positive correlation ($r = .51$) with the alternative method of assessing contempt (i.e., contemptuous facial expressions), thereby providing evidence for convergent validity. Moreover, the two measures of contempt showed a similar pattern of correlations with all other measures. With regard to the nomological validity, the pattern of results generally conforms to our predictions. The five-item contempt measure showed a moderately strong positive correlation with anger ($r = .47$) and callousness ($r = .48$), a moderately strong negative correlation with gratitude ($r = -.43$), empathy ($r = -.48$), modesty ($r = -.46$) and fairness ($r = -.39$), a weak negative correlation with sincerity ($r = -.17$) and greed-avoidance ($r = -.11$), and, unexpectedly, no association with disgust ($r = .04$). With regard to the discriminant validity, contempt showed weak negative relationships with the presumably unrelated constructs vitality ($r = -.25$) and humor orientation ($r = -.22$).

**CFA.** We used a sample of 74 undergraduate students to cross-validate the findings of the EFA presented above. A CFA using AMOS (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999) showed that our single-factor model had good fit, $\chi^2(5, N = 74) = 5.16$, $p = .40$, RMSEA = .02, and CFI = .99. Moreover, across both samples (i.e., the leader sample described above and the student sample) we found adequate properties of reliability $\alpha = .88$ and $\alpha = .73$ respectively. Hence, the developed five-item contempt scale showed solid internal consistency.

**Discussion Study 1**
Taken together, the pattern of results generally conforms to our predictions and provides some evidence for the convergent validity, nomological validity, and discriminant validity of the developed scale. One exception is the absence of a moderately strong positive correlation between contempt and disgust. An explanation for this non-significant association between contempt and disgust is the lack of an interpersonal dimension in the disgust scale we used.

Table 3.1 *Means, Standard Deviations, and Principal-Components Analysis of Contempt Items*

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<td>1. I feel indignity for other people</td>
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<td>2. I look down on other people</td>
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<td>3. I discredit other people’s achievements</td>
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<td>4. I tend to ridicule people with a lower status</td>
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<td>5. I have the feeling that others are inferior to me</td>
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Table 3.2 Intercorrelations and Reliabilities for all Study Variables in Study 1

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<td>.22</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.05 (86)</td>
<td>.03 (81)</td>
<td>.16 (81)</td>
<td>.39 (86)</td>
<td>.30 (81)</td>
<td>.35 (86)</td>
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<td>.31 (81)</td>
<td>.37 (81)</td>
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<td>14.</td>
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<td>.03 (84)</td>
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<td>.17 (84)</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.01 (81)</td>
<td>.05 (81)</td>
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<td>.11 (81)</td>
<td>.11 (81)</td>
<td>.13 (81)</td>
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<td>.17 (81)</td>
<td>.22 (81)</td>
<td>.40 (81)</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>.11 (86)</td>
<td>.10 (86)</td>
<td>.06 (86)</td>
<td>.10 (86)</td>
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<td>.26 (86)</td>
<td>.22 (86)</td>
<td>.03 (86)</td>
<td>.37 (86)</td>
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<td>.25 (86)</td>
<td>.17 (86)</td>
<td>.28 (86)</td>
<td>.08 (86)</td>
<td>.38 (86)</td>
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<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.13 (84)</td>
<td>.02 (84)</td>
<td>.01 (84)</td>
<td>.22 (84)</td>
<td>.07 (84)</td>
<td>.14 (84)</td>
<td>.19 (84)</td>
<td>.24 (84)</td>
<td>.21 (84)</td>
<td>.06 (84)</td>
<td>.04 (84)</td>
<td>.08 (84)</td>
<td>.01 (84)</td>
<td>.20 (84)</td>
<td>.25 (84)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 1 = Age, 2 = Sex (0 = male, 1 = female), 3 = Education, 4 = Number of subordinates, 5 = Years supervisory position, 6 = Contempt, 7 = Contemptuous facial expression, 8 = Anger, 9 = Disgust, 10 = Gratitude, 11 = Empathy, 12 = Modesty, 13 = Fairness, 14 = Sincerity, 15 = Greed-avoidance, 16 = Callousness, 17 = Vitality, 18 = Humor orientation. Significant correlations are bold-faced. Scale reliabilities are displayed on the diagonal.
Study 2

Method

Participants and procedure. A total of 164 undergraduate Dutch psychology students (73.2% women; $M_{age} = 20.55$, $SD = 2.01$) completed a questionnaire online in exchange for partial course credits\(^1\).

Measures. To measure moral identity and contempt we used 7-point Likert-type scales ($1 =$ strongly disagree, $7 =$ strongly agree).

Moral identity was measured using the 5-item internalization subscale of Aquino and Reed’s (2002) validated self-importance of moral identity questionnaire. These items assess the extent to which moral trait associations are rooted in a person’s sense of self. First, participants are presented with nine characteristics that describe a person (e.g., Caring, Compassionate, Fair, and Friendly) and are asked to visualize this person for a moment. Next, participants were asked to respond to the items (e.g., “Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am”; “It would make me feel good to be a person that has these characteristics”). All items were combined into a reliable moral identity score (see Table 3.3 for the reliabilities of the scales).

Contempt was measured with our self-developed 5-item scale.

Reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors was assessed with 12 vignettes (cf. Barkan, Ayal, Gino, & Ariely, 2012; Van Yperen, Hamstra, & Van der Klauw, 2010). In each of the vignettes participants were asked to imagine that they were the leader. All vignettes described a realistic situation in which the protagonist had the opportunity to act unethically (e.g., in terms of abusive supervision, fraud, nepotism, cronyism etc.). For instance, participants read the following vignette:

\(^1\) Eight participants finished the study faster by more than one standard deviation than the other participants and showed a repetitive pattern in their answers, which indicates that they did not participate seriously. These cases were excluded from the analyses. Analyses on the full sample showed a similar pattern of results, although the significance of our interaction effect was reduced.
“Imagine that you are the operations manager of a firm that produces health food. Your organic fruit beverage has 109 calories per serving. However, you know that people are sensitive to crossing the critical threshold of 100 calories. You could decrease the serving size by 10%. The label will then say that each serving has 98 calories, and the fine print will say that each bottle contains 2.2 servings” (Barkan et al., 2012).

On a 9-point Likert-type scale (1 = I would not under any circumstances act in this way, 9 = I might act in this way under certain circumstances) participants indicated their probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors. All scores were averaged into one single score.

Results

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations for all study variables are displayed in Table 3.3.

Reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors. Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test our hypotheses. All continuous predictor variables were mean centered prior to our analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). To predict the reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors we included the variable sex in Step 1, the main effect terms of our independent variables (Moral identity and Contempt) in Step 2, and the two-way interaction term in Step 3.

Step 1 did not explain a significant proportion of variance in the reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors, \( \Delta R^2 = .01, \Delta F (1,162) = 2.34, p = .13 \). Step 2 revealed our predicted main effects of moral identity and contempt, \( \Delta R^2 = .15, \Delta F (2,160) = 13.95, p < .001 \). Specifically, moral identity showed a marginally significant negative association with the reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors, \( B = -0.17, SE_b = 0.09, t(160) = -1.94, p = .055 \) (Hypothesis 1), whereas contempt was positively correlated with the reported probability to
display unethical supervisory behaviors, $B = 0.29$, $SE_b = 0.07$, $t(160) = 4.19$, $p < .001$ (Hypothesis 2).

More importantly, Step 3 revealed that these main effects were qualified by our predicted Moral identity $\times$ Contempt interaction, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F (1,159) = 4.21$, $p = .04$ (see Figure 3.1). Simple slopes analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) showed that, in line with Hypothesis 3, moral identity was negatively related to the reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors among individuals with low levels of contempt (1 $SD$ below the mean), $B = -0.36$, $SE_b = 0.13$, $t(159) = -2.84$, $p = .01$, but showed no relationship to the reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors among individuals with high levels of contempt (1 $SD$ above the mean), $B = -0.02$, $SE_b = 0.12$, $t(159) = -0.15$, $p = .89$. This supported our main prediction that contempt weakens the negative association between moral identity and the reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors.

Table 3.3 Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Intercorrelations for Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Sex</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Moral identity</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>(81)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Contempt</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>(78)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>(63)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 164$. Cronbach’s alphas are displayed on the diagonal. Male = 0; Female = 1. 
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. 

Figure 3.1 *Reported probability to display unethical supervisory behaviors as a function of moral identity and contempt in Study 2*

Study 3

Method

**Procedure.** The study was conducted online as a leadership survey. Participants were recruited using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk Website and were paid $1 for their participation. Note that previous research has shown that data obtained with Mechanical Turk are at least as reliable as those obtained via traditional methods (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Mason & Suri, 2012; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Only respondents holding a managerial or supervisory position with a minimum of three direct subordinates were allowed to participate in the survey.

**Respondents.** Seventy-five organizational leaders (48% women; $M_{age} = 32.89$, $SD = 9.47$) with an average work experience of 12.63 years ($SD = 8.14$), average tenure in a supervisory position of 5.62 years ($SD = 5.41$), average tenure on the current job of 4.77 years ($SD = 4.12$), and an average of 8.36 direct subordinates ($SD = 8.23$) participated in our study. Of the respondents, 36% had secondary education (high school), 38.7% had a bachelor’s degree, 14.7% had a master’s degree, 5.3% had an MBA degree, and 5.3% had a doctoral degree.
**Measures.** Unless stated otherwise, all responses were assessed using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). To assess leader’s moral identity and contempt we used similar measures as in Study 2 (see Table 3.4 for the reliabilities of the scales).

The 15-item Abusive Supervision Scale (Tepper, 2000) comprised our dependent measure of abusive supervisory behaviors. Because the original items of this scale are tapping into how subordinates rate their leaders on the use of abusive supervisory behaviors, we slightly adapted the items for the purposes of the current study in which leaders were asked to rate themselves on their abusive supervisory behaviors (e.g., “My boss lies to me” was changed to “I lied to my subordinates”). For each of the 15 items respondents indicated the number of times they had performed the described behavior during the past year (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = usually, 5 = always).

**Results**

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations for all study variables are displayed in Table 3.4.

**Abusive supervisory behaviors.** As in Study 2, we used hierarchical regression analysis to test our hypotheses. Abusive supervisory behaviors were predicted by main effect terms for the control variables (Sex and Education) at Step 1, main effect terms for our independent variables (Moral identity and Contempt) at Step 2, and the two-way interaction term at Step 3.

Step 1 explained a significant proportion of variance in abusive supervisory behaviors, $\Delta R^2 = .11$, $\Delta F (2,72) = 4.48$, $p = .02$. Specifically, only sex was significantly related to abusive supervisory behaviors, $B = -0.25$, $SE_b = 0.08$, $t(72) = -2.99$, $p < .01$, indicating that female leaders reported that they would act in a less abusive way than male leaders. Step 2 explained a significant proportion of variance, $\Delta R^2 = .32$, $\Delta F (2,70) = 19.44$, $p < .001$, and it unveiled our predicted main effects of moral identity and contempt. As expected, leaders’ moral identity was negatively associated
with abusive supervisory behaviors, $B = -0.15$, $SE_b = 0.06$, $t(70) = -2.61$, $p = .01$ (Hypothesis 1), and leaders’ tendency to experience feelings of contempt was positively associated with abusive supervisory behaviors, $B = 0.16$, $SE_b = 0.03$, $t(70) = 5.16$, $p < .001$ (Hypothesis 2).

More importantly, Step 3 revealed our predicted Moral identity × Contempt interaction, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $\Delta F (1,69) = 5.04$, $p = .03$ (see Figure 3.2). Simple slopes analyses showed that, in line with Hypothesis 3, moral identity was negatively related to abusive supervisory behaviors for low contempt leaders (1 SD below the mean), $B = -0.29$, $SE_b = 0.08$, $t(69) = -3.47$, $p = .001$, but showed no relationship to abusive supervisory behaviors for high contempt leaders (1 SD above the mean), $B = -0.05$, $SE_b = 0.08$, $t(69) = -0.62$, $p = .54$. These results thus lend additional support for our general proposition that contempt weakens the negative association between leaders’ moral identity and unethical behavior.

Table 3.4 Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Intercorrelations for Study 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
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<th>(4)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Sex</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Education</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Moral identity</td>
<td>6.41</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>(.72)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Contempt</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>(.83)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Abusive supervisory behaviors</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>-.33**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.38**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>(.82)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. $N = 75$. Cronbach’s alphas are displayed on the diagonal. Male = 0; Female = 1. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. 
Study 4

Method

Procedure. The study was conducted online as a leadership survey. Participants were recruited using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk Website and were paid $0.60 for their participation. Only respondents holding a managerial or supervisory position with a minimum of three direct subordinates were allowed to participate in the study. At the start of the study, we measured respondent’s trait-like anger and disgust as our theoretical control variables. Next, we measured respondent’s moral identity using the same scale as in Study 2 and 3. Then, respondents were randomly assigned to either a control condition or a contempt condition. Finally, we asked respondents to fill out a manipulation check and to indicate their intentions to show abusive supervisory behaviors. At the end of the study participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid via the Mechanical Turk Website.
Respondents. Seventy-eight organizational leaders (48.7% women; $M_{age} = 35.18$, $SD = 11.33$) were randomly assigned to the control condition or the contempt condition. Respondents’ average work experience was 15.57 years ($SD = 11.16$), average tenure in a supervisory position was 6.37 years ($SD = 6.12$), and on average respondents supervised 15.27 direct subordinates ($SD = 24.57$). Of the respondents, 30.8% had secondary education (high school), 47.4% had a bachelor’s degree, 12.8% had a master’s degree, 3.8% had an MBA degree, and 5.1% had a doctoral degree.

Theoretical control variables. Unless stated otherwise, all responses were assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Trait-like anger ($M = 2.39$; $SD = 0.83$; $\alpha = .90$) and trait-like disgust ($M = 3.04$; $SD = 0.70$; $\alpha = .78$) was measured with the same items as in Study 1.

Moral identity. Analogous to Studies 2 and 3, leader’s moral identity was measured with the 5-item moral identity internalization subscale ($M = 4.10$; $SD = 0.80$; $\alpha = .89$; Aquino & Reed, 2002).

Contempt manipulation. Feelings of contempt were manipulated by asking organizational leaders to imagine and describe a specific subordinate. In this manipulation we used a similar phrasing as in our measure of contempt (see Study 1). Specifically, in the contempt condition participants read:

“In the field below please imagine and describe a subordinate for whom you feel contempt (i.e., a subordinate for whom you feel indignity). What is this subordinate like? How would this subordinate behave? Why would you look down on this subordinate or feel that this subordinate is inferior to you?”

In the control condition, participants were asked to:

“Imagine and describe a subordinate for whom you have NO strong negative or positive feelings (i.e., a subordinate to whom your

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2 Three participants who were repeatedly detected as outliers across several measures were excluded from the analyses. Analyses on the full sample showed a similar pattern of results, although the significance of our interaction effect was reduced.
feelings are neutral). What is this subordinate like? How would this subordinate behave?"

**Manipulation check.** As a manipulation check we used one question where respondents had to rate on a picture showing a contemptuous facial expression the amount of contempt they felt for the described subordinate (cf. Rozin et al., 1999). Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent the picture accurately portrayed their feelings towards the described subordinate (0 = *not at all*, 100 = *extremely*). Note that the validity and reliability of single item visual analogue scales are usually considered to be as good as those of likert-type scales (cf. Funke & Reips, 2012). Moreover, by using this measure we could refrain from using a measure that contained words similar to the ones used in the contempt manipulation (such a measure would perhaps measure recognition more than it would contempt).

**Abusive supervisory behaviors.** Using the 15-item Abusive Supervision Scale (Tepper, 2000) we assessed respondent’s *probability of displaying abusive supervisory behaviors* (*M* = 1.74; *SD* = 0.79; α = .95) towards the described subordinate.

**Results**

**Manipulation check.** A t-test on our manipulation check revealed that respondents in the contempt condition (*M* = 61.79, *SD* = 27.35) reported higher levels of an accurate description of their feelings towards the subordinate by the picture displaying a contemptuous facial expression than respondents in the control condition (*M* = 21.35, *SD* = 30.93), *t*(76) = 6.05, *p* < .001.

**Abusive supervisory behaviors.** As in Study 2 and 3, we used hierarchical regression analysis to test our hypotheses. Moral identity was centered by subtracting the mean from each score and contempt was dummy coded (.5 and .5 for the control condition and the contempt condition respectively). To replicate the findings of Study 3, we first conducted a hierarchical regression analysis including sex and education as
control variables, but excluding our theoretical control variables anger and disgust. Similar to Study 3, leader’s moral identity was negatively associated with the probability of displaying abusive supervisory behaviors, $B = -0.30$, $SE_b = 0.11$, $t(73) = -2.80$, $p < .01$ (Hypothesis 1), and leaders’ contempt was positively associated with the probability of displaying abusive supervisory behaviors, $B = 0.39$, $SE_b = 0.17$, $t(73) = 2.32$, $p = .02$ (Hypothesis 2). Step 3 revealed our predicted Moral identity × Contempt interaction, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $\Delta F (1, 72) = 4.06$, $p = .05$. Simple slopes analyses showed that, in line with Hypothesis 3, moral identity was negatively related to abusive supervisory behaviors for low contempt leaders (1 SD below the mean), $B = -0.46$, $SE_b = 0.11$, $t(72) = -3.49$, $p = .001$, but showed no relationship to abusive supervisory behaviors for high contempt leaders (1 SD above the mean), $B = -0.04$, $SE_b = 0.17$, $t(72) = -0.24$, $p = .81$.

Next, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis in which we included our theoretical control variables to test whether our predictions hold when controlling for anger and disgust. Hence, the probability of displaying abusive supervisory behaviors was predicted by main effect terms for the control variables (Sex, Education, Anger, and Disgust) at Step 1, main effect terms for our independent variables (Moral identity and Contempt) at Step 2, and the two-way interaction term at Step 3.

Step 1 explained a significant proportion of variance in the probability of displaying abusive supervisory behaviors, $\Delta R^2 = .16$, $\Delta F (4, 73) = 5.65$, $p = .01$. Specifically, only anger was positively associated with abusive supervisory behaviors, $B = 0.24$, $SE_b = 0.11$, $t(73) = 2.19$, $p = .03$.

Step 2 unveiled our predicted main effects of moral identity and contempt, $\Delta R^2 = .12$, $\Delta F (2, 71) = 5.65$, $p = .01$. As predicted, leader’s moral identity was negatively associated with abusive supervisory behaviors, $B = -0.29$, $SE_b = 0.11$, $t(71) = -2.72$, $p = .01$ (Hypothesis 1), and leader’s contempt was positively associated with abusive supervisory behaviors, $B = 0.39$, $SE_b = 0.17$, $t(71) = 2.35$, $p = .02$ (Hypothesis 2).

Step 3 explained incremental variance in intentions to display abusive supervisory behaviors beyond the variance explained by our control
variables and main effects, \( \Delta R^2 = .04, \Delta F (1,70) = 4.33, p = .04 \). Specifically, results showed our predicted Moral identity \( \times \) Contempt interaction, \( B = 0.43, SE_b = 0.22, t(70) = 2.08, p = .04 \). Simple slopes analyses revealed that, in line with Hypothesis 3, moral identity was negatively related to the probability of displaying abusive supervisory behaviors for those in the control condition, \( B = -0.46, SE_b = 0.13, t(70) = -3.47, p = .001 \), but showed no relationship to abusive supervisory behaviors for those in the contempt condition, \( B = -0.03, SE_b = 0.16, t(70) = -0.18, p = .86 \).

**Discussion**

The recent rash of corporate scandals revealing leader unethical and abusive behavior has raised concern among the general public about the potential moral bankruptcy of those in power. Next to the popular outcry against unethical leaders, empirical findings have shown that unethical or abusive leader behavior has negative consequences including leader ineffectiveness and employee workplace deviance (De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2004; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Mars, 2009). Given the negative consequences of unethical leader behavior the question that calls for an answer is what drives leaders to act unethically or abusively?

In the present research we argued and showed that although moral identity in general may inhibit unethical or abusive supervisory behaviors, its regulating function may be weakened by contempt. In Study 1 we developed and tested a short measure to assess contempt, and across three subsequent studies we consistently found support for our main hypothesis that contempt moderates the relationship between moral identity and unethical supervisory behaviors, such that the stronger the contempt the

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3 Analyses conducted without controlling for sex, education, anger and disgust showed similar findings in terms of direction and significance. Furthermore, as our reliance on leaders’ self-report of their abusive supervision may be problematic in light of socially desirable answer patterns, we ran the same analyses controlling for social desirability. Adding social desirability as a control variable did not change the direction or significance of our findings.
weaker the negative relationship between moral identity and unethical supervisory behaviors. Moreover, the main effect for moral identity shows that it generally is a factor restraining unethical and or abusive supervisory behaviors, whereas the main effect of contempt shows that it is indeed a factor that motivates behavior that is inconsistent with the self-regulatory demands of one’s moral identity.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Although previous research has indicated that moral identity plays a promising role in predicting moral behavior (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Reynolds & Ceramic, 2007), good people sometimes do bad things (Messick & Tenbrunsel, 1996). As such, it seems essential to understand under what conditions good people cannot refrain themselves from unethical or abusive behavior. Unfortunately, there is still a paucity of research aiming to study the influence of potential moderators (Aquino et al., 2009; Hardy & Carlo, 2005) in the link between leaders’ moral identity and their (un)ethical behavior. With the present research we hope to have opened an avenue for future research to examine under what conditions even high moral identifiers may derail from ethical behavior. By identifying contempt as an important moderator in the relationship between leaders’ moral identity and unethical or abusive behavior we believe that the present research contributes to the extant literature in several ways.

Although its potential importance in a work-context has been highlighted in previous research (e.g., Pelzer, 2005), to our knowledge, no studies have empirically tested the role of contempt in predicting supervisory behaviors. This could be (partially) explained by the absence of a measure assessing contempt. To this end, we developed and tested the validity of a measure that assesses the negative other-directed emotion of contempt in the current article. Using this measure of contempt we provided first empirical evidence that contempt plays a crucial role in predicting unethical or abusive supervisory behaviors. Interestingly, feelings of contempt can also be derived from feeling *morally* superior.
On Ethically Bankrupted Leaders

(Ekman, 1994). The items developed for the present study do not tap into feeling morally superior. However, it would be an interesting avenue for future research to investigate whether feelings of moral superiority would lead to similar or different results.

Moreover, the present research underscores the important role of moderators in the moral identity-unethical leader behavior relationship. Specifically, we showed that moral identity’s function of inhibiting the display of unethical supervisory behaviors can be weakened by feelings of contempt. Taking a broader theoretical view, the present study integrates two separate streams of research: research on moral identity and moral emotions. Historically, research on ethical behavior has focused on variables deduced from the cognitive developmental models (Kohlberg, 1969; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). However, these variables have been shown to be only moderately strong related to (un)ethical behavior (Blasi, 1983; Bergman, 2004; Treviño & Weaver, 2006), giving rise to research on moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984). Meanwhile, inspired by the social-intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001), the influence of emotions in shaping (un)ethical behavior was highlighted in a separate stream of research. However, attempts to integrate both streams of research are scarce. Yet, an integrative view may be particularly fruitful in furthering our understanding of the drivers of (un)ethical behavior (Smetana & Killen, 2008). To this end, the present research adds to the extant literature by integrating two previously separately studied variables—moral identity and contempt—and showing that they jointly shape unethical leader behavior.

From a practical point of view, our findings suggest that if we want to prevent leaders from behaving unethically, it seems important to both increase the salience of their moral identity and reduce their feelings of contempt. Moral identity centrality can be increased by providing leaders with the opportunities to act ethically (e.g., by having them participate in community service projects; Wisse, Rus, & Tanghe, 2015). Acting ethically may bolster leaders’ moral identity, because it helps them to integrate morality in their self-identity (Damon, 1984; Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer, &
Alisat, 2003). One way to reduce leaders’ contemptuous feelings is to increase leaders’ awareness of the different competencies their subordinates may have. Previous research has shown that the intensity of feelings of contempt is higher for those that are deemed incompetent or unintelligent (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Hence, reducing leaders’ judgment of subordinates as incompetent or unintelligent may downplay the contemptuous feelings they have towards their subordinates. Another way to reduce leaders’ feelings of contempt is to place more emphasis on the development or training of other-directed positive emotions (e.g., feeling gratitude for subordinates), and to restrict leaders’ display of contempt by clarifying display and feeling rules of emotions in the work-context (cf. Hochschild, 2003; Michie & Gooty, 2005).

**Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

The consistent findings across samples, methods, and outcomes increase our confidence in the results presented. Although emotions are typically known for their state-like characteristics (i.e., their sudden onset and limited duration of experience), they can also have more trait-like characteristics, which pertain to the tendency of an individual to experience a particular emotion with frequency in their day-to-day life (Izard, 1991). By replicating the findings using a manipulation of feelings of contempt (in Study 4) instead of a trait-like measure (Study 2 and 3) we aimed to show that both the trait-like tendency to experience contempt, as well as the momentary state of experiencing contempt can have an influence on the moral identity-unethical behavior link. Moreover, by showing that the interactive effects between moral identity and contempt hold when controlling for anger and disgust, we demonstrated that anger-free contempt and anger-free disgust has a similar impact on the moral identity-unethic behavior link. In addition, we hope that the developed and tested short measure of contempt inspires other researchers to investigate the role of contempt in an organizational context.
Nevertheless, our research suffers from its own limitations. First, our studies are based on single-source data and we assessed undesirable behaviors via self-reports rather than via behavioral measures. There is however evidence suggesting that, when measuring undesirable behaviors, self-reports are as precise as more ‘objective’ measures such as lie detector tests (Clark & Tifft, 1966; Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weiss, 1979). Moreover, by replicating our findings in multiple studies employing different methods we hope to have increased the confidence in our findings. Second, we posited that whereas moral identity pushes leaders away from displaying unethical behavior, contempt, an emotion that guides leaders in the opposite—unethical—direction could undermine moral identities self-regulating function. However, we did not directly test underlying mechanisms that could be responsible for the effects we found. Based on our theoretical underpinnings, reduced accessibility (or activation) of the moral self-schema could be a possible underlying mechanism responsible for the effects we found. A reduced accessibility of one’s moral self-schema can result in a decreased impact of one’s moral self-schema on subsequent behavior (Aquino et al., 2009). Future research has yet to explicate whether this is indeed the case.

To conclude, the present research is the first to show that leaders’ identity based moral compass can steer leaders in a direction that refrains them from unethical behavior but that its function is vulnerable to the influence of contempt. Leaders’ identity based moral compass only prevents leaders from taking the ‘wrong’ turn when not disrupted by feelings of contempt.