How the Influence of Unethical Leaders on Followers Is Affected by Their Implicit Followership Theories

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Abstract

Our research examines the role of followers in unethical leadership. Drawing on a social–cognitive approach to leadership and recent research in the field of behavioral ethics, we focus on how leader behavior and follower information processing interact to produce unethical outcomes. In two experimental studies simulating a personnel selection context, we examine to what extent individual implicit assumptions regarding the follower role (i.e., implicit followership theories, IFTs) relate to employees’ tendency to comply with leader unethical suggestions. In Study 1, controlling for possible alternative explanations such as personal need for structure, romance of leadership, and moral disengagement, we found that the IFT Good Citizen increased and the IFT Insubordination decreased followers’ tendencies to contribute to unethical leadership. In Study 2, we varied the leader’s unethical suggestions to further investigate the conditions under which these effects occur and included authoritarianism as an additional control variable. Overall, our findings suggest that IFTs make a unique contribution to our understanding of the role of followers in unethical leadership, and that this contribution depends on the way leaders frame their unethical request. Interaction effects suggest that follower characteristics need to be considered as they are embedded in specific situational settings rather than as isolated traits.

Keywords
unethical behavior, followership, implicit followership theories, unethical leadership, moral disengagement

Unethical developments in organizations are often attributed to bad leaders or leaders’ failure to implement moral standards. While this approach can be useful to explain unethical acts directly conducted by leaders (e.g., Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Tepper, 2007), unethical leadership transcends beyond the leaders’ own behavior (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). In cases in which leaders fulfill their unethical intentions through the acts of followers (Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013), focusing on the leader alone is likely not to be sufficient (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). As leaders influence organizational outcomes indirectly through their followers’ behavior (Lord & Dinh, 2014; Shamir, 2007), the way followers understand their role is crucial. For example, some forms of (unethical) leadership only take effect when employees internalize the follower role (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and embody this role in a way that contributes to (unethical) leadership (Carsten, & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Morrison, 1994).

Employees use roles such as leader and follower as cues to structure their expectations about the adequate behavior of people who occupy specific positions (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991). Social–cognitive approaches to leadership (Lord & Maher, 1991) showed that when constructing these roles, employees draw on their cognitive structures and schemas regarding traits and behaviors of leaders and followers, that is, implicit leadership and followership theories (ILTs and IFTs; Shondrick & Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010). More recently, conceptual papers (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013; van Gils, van Quaquebeke, & van Knippenberg, 2010) suggested that ILTs and IFTs also influence how people interpret their own roles. What followers (implicitly) associate with their role should thus influence the nature of their contribution to a broad range of organizational outcomes, including (un)ethical leadership (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Parker, 2007).

Considering followers’ implicit theories seem to be particularly promising in order to understand when and why they contribute to unethical leadership in ambiguous
situations (Moore & Gino, 2013; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). Individuals are faced with sometimes contradicting demands relating to the interest of the organization which can contradict the interests of external stakeholders (Giacalone & Thompson, 2006; Reynolds, Leavitt, & DeCelles, 2010). Unethical leaders may take advantage of such (seeming) contradictions by creating ambiguity. They can do so by linking unethical behavior to valued organizational outcomes. As we explain in more detail below, behavioral ethics research (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010; Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006) suggests that not only employees with clearly negative characteristics may engage in unethical behavior in ambiguous situations. Consequently, we need to understand unethical behavior when those who exert it (a) may not have the characteristics of people typically seen as unethical, (b) may not realize that they contribute to unethical acts, and (c) might even think that they contribute to the good of the company (Moore & Gino, 2013; Reynolds et al., 2010).

Applying behavioral ethics and social–cognitive approaches to leadership and followership, our research extends the current knowledge in three ways. First, we provide evidence for follower contributions to unethical leadership. As we review below, followers’ contributions to unethical leadership have been acknowledged as important. However, not much prior research has focused on followers. Second, we examine how followers’ implicit role construction—defined as the extent to which individuals possess particular IFTs—interacts with unethical leader behavior to coproduce unethical outcomes. We approach this aim by linking behavioral ethics research and IFTs. Notably, we introduce IFTs as an indicator of followers’ implicit role orientation, therefore complementing research focusing on leader-rated IFTs (Junker & van Dick, 2014). Third, we add to the growing field of IFTs research by examining the consequences of IFTs with respect to unethical behavior and unethical leadership. We report two studies in which we manipulate unethical requests made by a leader and examine how followers’ IFTs influence their compliance. To examine the extent to which IFTs have a unique effect, we control for individual differences that have been previously linked to follower compliance with requests made by unethical leaders.

**Theoretical Background**

**The Role of Followers in Unethical Leadership**

Unethical leadership comprises “behaviors conducted and decisions made by organizational leaders that are illegal and/or violate moral standards, and those that impose processes and structures that promote unethical conduct by followers” (Brown & Mitchell, 2010, p. 588). While a leader can conduct unethical acts such as fraud and theft independently, leadership requires that one person (e.g., a manager) claims the leader role and at least one other person grants the leader role and accepts the follower role (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Thus, some forms of leadership only occur when unethical leaders’ influence attempts are met by followers whose characteristics make them susceptible to such attempts (Krasikova et al., 2013; Lipman-Blumen, 2004; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007).

Attempts to identify the characteristics of followers that contribute to unethical forms of leadership (for reviews, see Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) resulted in follower classifications such as bystanders and authoritarians. These follower types contribute to unethical leadership either due to their inability to resist unethical influence attempts or because of their pursuit of personal gain through association with unethical leaders. However, evidence suggests that, at times, individuals engage in unethical behaviors even though they lack negative traits or selfish intentions (Moore & Gino, 2013). Employees sometimes engage in unethical behaviors due to prioritizing organizational goals over other concerns (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000) or merely aim at benefitting their organization (Umphress & Bingham, 2010). Indeed, classical social psychological studies and descriptions of historic events (e.g., Bauman, 1989; Reicher, Haslam, & Smith, 2012) showed that good intentions and unethical acts are not necessarily contradictory. To give an example, in Milgram’s (1974) studies, participants explained why they gave apparently deadly shocks because they wanted to contribute to the improvement of learning strategies and help the experiment(ers) to be successful. Consequently, there is a need to understand the many ways through which followers contribute to unethical leadership. That means that we need to consider a broad range of employee characteristics and their specific interaction with context conditions (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009). Doing so will complement the current focus on followers’ negative traits and deficits. Moreover, recent research in the field of behavioral ethics (Bazerman & Gino, 2012) revealed that (un)ethical behavior is only partly determined by deliberate choice. In contrast, it is based, to a considerable extent, on reflexive, automatic, and intuitive processes (Haidt, 2001; Moore & Gino, 2013; Reynolds, 2006). Linking social–cognitive approaches to leadership and followership (Shondrick & Lord, 2010) and recent research in behavioral ethics, we propose that the way employees implicitly construct their follower role is an underexplored reason for their susceptibility to unethical leaders.

**Implicit Influences on Followers’ (Un)Ethical Behavior**

Normative approaches to ethics focus on how people ought to act (e.g., Kohlberg, 1984). Consequently, when a leader instructs a follower to conduct an unethical act, the follower
will deliberately weigh benefits and costs of either complying or resisting the leader’s unethical request. Behavioral ethics research, in contrast, focuses on how people actually behave when facing a moral issue (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). Here, the assumption is that implicit processes such as habits, schemas, and intuitions drive a great deal of human behavior (Bargh, 1997). We assume that the same also applies to (un)ethical behaviors. Implicit information processing implies that “introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience” (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p. 15) influence both perceptions and evaluations of current situations. These processes are influenced by contextual cues and individual differences. To give an example: Reynolds et al. (2010) showed that participants who held the implicit assumption that business is inherently moral showed more immoral behavior in business-related tasks when contextual cues framed the situation as competitive.

Interactionist versions of implicit approaches to ethical behavior (Reynolds et al., 2010) seem particularly relevant in explaining follower contributions to unethical leadership. Indeed, a leader’s unethical request can function as a contextual cue. Followers interpret this cue based on their prior experiences and react accordingly. They refer to existing knowledge structures to inform their behavior. These knowledge structures comprise idiosyncratic memories and schemas, but also existing expectations of how people who occupy specific roles should behave (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Followers’ ideas and beliefs about their role (Morrison, 1994; Neale & Griffin, 2006) result in specific assumptions regarding “what types and breadth of tasks, goals, and problems they see within their set of responsibilities, and how they believe they should approach those tasks, goals, and problems” (Parker, 2007, p. 404). To what extent these potentially multifarious role constructions include contributing to unethical acts is the focus of the current research.

Implicit Followership Theories and Unethical Leadership

ILTs and IFTs (for reviews, see Epitropaki et al., 2013; Shondrick & Lord, 2010) are cognitive structures and schemas about traits and behaviors of followers and leaders. In contrast to scientific theories, they represent social constructions. ILTs and IFTs develop in the course of socialization after being exposed to relevant stimuli. They are stored in memory and activated whenever individuals interact with (potential) representatives of the categories leader and follower (Eden & Levitran, 1975; Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996).

In a first approach to conceptualize content, structure, and consequences of IFTs, Sy (2010) differentiated six dimensions of followership, namely, Industry, Enthusiasm, and Good Citizen as well as Conformity, Insubordination, and Incompetence. These dimensions form two second-order factors: a Followership Prototype and a Followership Antiprototype, respectively. Their inherent positive and negative connotation stems from the assumption that the followership prototype is positively and the antiprototype is negatively related to followership effectiveness. Follower characteristics that signify effectiveness, however, may not necessarily imply ethicality. As we discussed above, well-meaning followers contribute to unethical outcomes at times (e.g., Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Umphress & Bingham, 2010). Against this background, we need to consider how different IFTs may relate to (un)ethical behavior. In the following, we start by developing hypotheses regarding the question which IFTs may make it more or less likely that followers contribute to unethical leadership by complying with a leader’s unethical advice.

IFTs That Might Facilitate Followers’ Contribution to Unethical Leadership. Conformity has been associated with followership in the organizational behavior literature (Oc & Bashshur, 2013), in analyses of historical situations of unethical follower compliance (e.g., crimes of obedience; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989), and in the literature on susceptible followers in the context of unethical and, more generally, destructive leadership (Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2012). In Carsten et al.’s (2010) exploratory study, just over one third of the participating employees had a passive construction of the follower role emphasizing lack of responsibility, following orders, and deferring to the leader’s knowledge and expertise. Sy’s (2010) assessment of “Conformity” as an IFT comprises the items Easily Influenced, Follows Trends, and Soft Spoken. We expect that employees who associate the follower role with these attributes are likely to comply with a leader’s advice. That will be the case even if the advice is unethical.

The IFTs Industry and Enthusiasm include the items Hardworking, Productive, and Goes above and beyond as well as Excited, Outgoing, and Happy, respectively. These attributes are associated with strong in-role performance and affiliative forms of extra-role behavior. However, they are not necessarily related to critical thinking and challenging forms of extra-role behavior (Carsten et al., 2010; van Dyne, Cummings, & McLean Parks, 1995). People who are dedicated to achieving a specific goal (as reflected in “Industry”) might be blind to any side effects of their behavior; followers who associate their role with enthusiasm, in turn, might be less attentive to negative outcomes of a leader’s advice (Barbuto, 2000; Darley & Batson, 1973; Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014). Thus, we expect followers who associate their role with industry and enthusiasm to follow a leader’s advice rather readily.
Our expectations regarding the influence of the IFT Good Citizen are mixed. On the one hand, Epitropaki et al. (2013) suggested that Good Citizen might be the only IFT that is related to being ethical. On the other hand, this suggestion might be problematic given that IFTs are not independent of the specific context and as such are tied to obligations to others (Leavitt, Reynolds, Barnes, Schilpzand, & Hannah, 2012). Taking into account that Sy (2010) defines this dimension using the items Loyal, Reliable, and Team Player, associating the follower role with being a Good Citizen might have a flipside. That is, when those kinds of followers receive a leader’s advice that is linked to a possible benefit for the organization, although the consequences might be unethical, they might behave unethically. This possibility is in line with the aforementioned research and theory that employees sometimes engage in unethical acts with the intent to benefit their organization and/or its members (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Brief et al., 2000; Reynolds et al., 2010; Umphress & Bingham, 2010).

In sum, we propose that associating the follower role with conformity, industry, enthusiasm, and being a good citizen might make employees susceptible to comply with a leader’s unethical request and thus contribute to unethical leadership. We expect:

**Hypothesis 1:** IFTs Conformity, Industry, Enthusiasm, and Good Citizen moderate the relationship between a leader’s unethical advice and follower compliance. Employees who hold these IFTs are more likely to contribute to unethical leadership if advised to do so by a supervisor.

**IFTs That Might Inhibit Followers’ Contribution to Unethical Leadership.** We expect that employees who hold the IFT Insubordination should be less likely to accept a leader’s advice. Employees who associate the follower role with items such as Arrogant, Rude, and Bad Tempered are not likely to accept authority at all and rather refuse to grant leadership to others (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In this case, unethical leadership will not unfold as employees refuse to accept leadership claims. Thus, ironically, the negatively connoted IFT Insubordination might prevent the organization from harm when followers holding this IFT disrupt an unethical leaders’ agenda. We do not have particular expectations regarding the IFT Incompetence, as the respective items Uneducated, Slow, and Inexperienced are not related to either ethical or unethical behavior. Consequently, we expect:

**Hypothesis 2:** IFT Insubordination moderates the relationship between a leader’s unethical advice and compliance. Employees who hold this IFT are less likely to contribute to unethical leadership if advised to do so by a superior.

**Study Overview**

Our aim to examine the influence of implicit processes on followers’ tendency to contribute to unethical leadership required a rather subtle strategy. Hence, we designed a situation in which employees were confronted with a superior’s advice to carry out an unethical act within the scope of an extensive in-basket exercise (for similar approaches, see Brief et al., 2000; Petersen & Dietz, 2000, 2008). In-basket exercises are typical components of assessment centers and are supposed to have considerable external validity (Bartol & Martin, 1990). That is why we preferred in-basket exercises over scenarios which also have been used in research on unethical behavior (e.g., Carsten et al., 2010). In two studies, we adopted Brief et al.’s (2000, see also Petersen & Dietz, 2008) design to examine whether (and which) IFTs increase or decrease followers’ tendency to comply with a leader’s advice and thus contribute to unethical leadership. Furthermore, we varied the leader’s unethical advice in the two studies to specify the conditions under which these contributions occur.

**Study I**

**Method**

**Participants.** The sample consisted of 187 individuals (80% female) with a mean age of 32.1 years (SD = 8.5). Of the participants, 116 were employed, 23 were self-employed, and 48 were not employed at the time of the study. Participants were enrolled in a distance education psychology program (MBA equivalent) at a German university and took part in this study in partial fulfillments of course requirements. Overall, 34% of the employees worked in small organizations (up to 20 employees), 32% worked in middle-size organizations (21-500 employees), 18% worked in larger organizations (501-10,000 employees), and 16% worked in large organizations (more than 10,000 employees). Indeed, 75% held entry-level positions, 13% were in lower management, and 12% were in middle or higher management. Different industries were represented in the sample, most of which were social and health care (21%), education (13%), sales and distribution (9%), manufacturing (9%), public administration (5%), and other services (23%). Half of the participants worked part-time (less than 30 hours/week). As 12 participants had a nationality other than German, we included nationality as control variable in the analyses.

**Procedure.** In the first part of the in-basket exercise, participants were asked to adopt the role of Mr. Riedel, a middle-manager in a German fast-food chain. They received information about the structure of the company and the responsibilities of Mr. Riedel. Participants then worked on a series of tasks, such as deciding on salaries for new
employees, organizing training programs, and reviewing applications for annual leave. In the second part of the in-basket exercise, participants were asked by the CEO to screen the applications of eight candidates and to suggest which three to invite for a job interview. Four candidates were native Germans and four were immigrants as was apparent on the candidates’ CV: They were either both raised and educated in European Mediterranean countries and had a foreign name or raised and educated in Germany and had a German name. Participants were instructed to respect two criteria when selecting candidates: The candidates should have experience in the food industry and in sales. Two German and two immigrant candidates fulfilled both criteria and were therefore equally qualified for the job in question. The other two German and two immigrant candidates met only one of the two criteria and were thus not qualified.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the control condition, instructions were merely to select the best candidates. In the experimental condition, the CEO’s instruction included a statement indicating that immigrants might not be appropriate for the position in question. The wording of the statement was as follows:

While reading the applications, I observed that there are foreigners among the applicants. When selecting an applicant, it is important to keep in mind that our staff in the headquarters consists almost exclusively of Germans. In the past, homogeneity of the human resources team has contributed very strongly to good teamwork and company success. Therefore, the new head of the human resources team must be a guarantor of a “good chemistry” in that team. (CEO)

As it constitutes discrimination (Dietz & Kleinlogel, 2015), complying with the instructions of this superior represents a contribution to unethical leadership as defined above (see Brown & Mitchell, 2010). We created an ambiguous situation because individual differences are more influential in these types of situations than in strong situations (Knoll, Lord, Petersen, & Weigelt, 2016; Mischel, 1977). Behavioral ethics research also revealed that employees may be particularly susceptible to engage in unethical behaviors if good intentions and unethical behaviors are entangled. That is why in our study, the discrimination was disguised as a positive act, that is, to keep a workforce homogeneous. Note that following the leader’s advice may facilitate cohesion and thus potentially benefit the organization, but discrimination remains an unethical act.

Controlling for Alternative Explanations. When confronted with a leader’s advice to act unethically (here: to discriminate in a personnel selection task), followers could (a) reconstruct the advice so that it is not viewed as immoral (because it is to the benefit of the organization), (b) reduce their sense of agency by minimizing their role in the situation (as they just followed orders), or (c) fail to see the consequences of their action (e.g., do not think about the consequences for the applicant that is not invited). Bandura (1999) suggested that individuals are more likely to engage in unethical acts if they apply a number of cognitive mechanisms (e.g., moral justification, palliative comparison, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences) to convert immoral acts so not to deviate from their moral standards. As such mechanisms of moral disengagement (MD) might facilitate the tendency to contribute to unethical organizational practices and thus question the relevance of IFTs, we included a measure of propensity for moral disengagement (Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012) as a control variable.

Another potential alternative explanation for the hypothesized effects is that followers may tend to displace responsibility for the unethical act to their leader (Carsten & Uhll-Bien, 2013; Milgram, 1974). Romance of leadership (ROL; Meindl, 1995) describes the tendency to make leaders responsible for the success and/or failure of an organization. Research has shown that ROL is not only related to the perception of leaders but also to decision making (Felfe & Petersen, 2007). Thus, ROL could be related to the decision to comply with a leader’s advice as followers high in ROL might have a stronger tendency to delegate responsibility for decision making to the leader (Bligh & Schyns, 2007).

Furthermore, it is possible that a more basic cognitive process might explain the expected findings and thus render IFTs redundant. Cognitive rigidity, for example, has been linked to unethical behavior (Reynolds, 2006) and social conformity (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jugert, Cohrs, & Duckitt, 2009). Personal Need for Structure (PNS; Neuberg & Newsom, 1993; Thompson, Naccarato, & Parker, 1989) describes the degree to which individuals prefer to process environmental information in a way that offers structure and allows them to feel in control. Individuals high in PNS feel uncomfortable when the rules in a situation are not clear. They arrange their social interactions in ways that enable them to avoid complexity and retain their simple structures. Individuals low in PNS, in contrast, are more open to divergent information and thus should be more likely to consider broader consequences. If a leader provides meaning for an event or frames advice in a way that seems appropriate for the follower (e.g., because the suggested option is in the best interest of the organization), followers high in PNS might be more willing to act in line with this advice, whereas followers low in PNS may consider the broader consequences. To show that IFTs have a unique effect above and beyond this alternative explanation, we controlled for PNS in our study.

Measures. Contribution to unethical leadership was operationalized as the extent to which the participants followed a leader’s advice to discriminate in a personnel selection
context, as described in more detail in the procedure section. Drawing on previous research (Brief et al., 2000), discrimination was measured as the number of foreign applicants selected for a job interview. The range was from 0 (no foreign applicants selected) to 3 points (three foreign applicants selected), with lower numbers indicating more discrimination.

Implicit followership theories were measured using Sy’s (2010) 18-item measure. As described in the theory section, the six dimensions of the IFTs are represented by three items each. Participants rate how typical each item (e.g., “Loyal”) is for a follower.

Moral disengagement was measured using Moore et al.’s (2012) Propensity to Morally Disengage scale. The scale assesses eight forms of MD with one item each. For example, diffusion of responsibility is measured with the item “People can’t be blamed for doing things that are technically wrong when all their friends are doing it too.” Moore et al. (2012) suggest aggregating the scores on the eight items to form a comprehensive score.

Romance of Leadership was measured using nine items that represented the core factor of the original ROL Scale (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1988; Schyns, Meindl, & Croon, 2007). A sample item reads “When it comes right down to it, the quality of leadership is the single most important influence in the functioning of an organization.”

Personal Need for Structure was measured using the German version (Machunsky & Meiser, 2006) of the 11-item scale that Neuberg and Newsom (1993) developed on basis of Thompson et al.’s (1989) PNS scale (sample item: “I become uncomfortable when the rules in a situation are unclear”).

Results

Preliminary Analyses. On average, the participants selected 1.23 (SD = 0.62) immigrant applicants. Participants of the control group selected 1.34 immigrants as job candidates, while participants of the experimental group selected 1.13 immigrants. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that the difference between control group and experimental group was significant, $F(186) = 5.69, p = .02$. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, alpha reliabilities, and zero-order correlations for all study variables.

Hypotheses Testing. After controlling for PNS, MD, and ROL, we expected that participants’ tendency to contribute to unethical leadership when confronted with a relevant advice given by a leader would be higher for the IFTs Conformity, Industry, Enthusiasm, and Good Citizen (Hypothesis 1) and lower for the IFT Insubordination (Hypothesis 2). To test this moderation effect, we conducted seven regression analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). As shown in Table 2, in a first step (Model 0), we included age, gender, nationality, and the control variables PNS, ROL, and MD in the regression. In a second step (Models 1a, 2a, 3a, 4a, 5a, 6a), we included the z-standardized scores for condition and one of the IFTs per regression. In a third step (Models 1b, 2b, 3b, 4b, 5b, 6b), we included the interaction term of condition and the relevant IFT dimension.

Table 2 shows that including the interaction between condition and the IFT Good Citizen significantly increased the explained variance. As depicted in Figure 1, simple slopes show that for employees high in the IFT Good Citizen, the suggestion to discriminate significantly decreases the number of selected immigrants, $t(176) = −3.34, p < .01$, indicating that followers high in the IFT Good Citizen contribute to unethical leadership more readily than those low in this IFT dimension. Regression analyses did not reveal significant contributions for interaction terms including condition and the IFT dimensions Conformity or Enthusiasm. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported for the IFT Good Citizen only.

Table 2 also shows that including the interaction between condition and the IFT dimension Insubordination significantly increased the explained variance by 3% ($β = .14, p = .05$), thus supporting Hypothesis 2. As shown in Figure 2, simple slopes show that for employees low in Insubordination, the suggestion to discriminate decreases the number of selected immigrants, $t(176) = −3.26, p < .01$. Thus, followers who associate the follower role with insubordination are less likely to behave in line with the unethical advice. The interaction term comprising condition and the IFT Incompetence was nonsignificant.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the degree to which followers contribute to unethical leadership depending on their IFTs. Our experimental study showed that, as expected, participants holding the IFT Good Citizen complied more strongly with a leader’s advice to discriminate in a personnel selection task, and participants high in the IFT dimension Insubordination were less willing to discriminate when the leader suggested doing so. Thus, employees who are more inclined to think of followers as loyal and team players can actually become part of a process that is unethical, although their image of followers might be considered to be positive. We did not find this effect for the other positively connoted IFTs Industry and Enthusiasm, and also not for Conformity. In Study 2, we refine our experimental design to further investigate why these effects were so specific for the IFT Good Citizen.

Study 2

In this study, we aim to replicate and specify our most important Study 1 finding—the possibility that associating
the follower role with being a good citizen might have negative effects. To specify the conditions under which employees high in the IFT Good Citizen contribute to unethical leadership, we extended our experimental design to differentiate the type of advices the leader gives.

When developing Hypothesis 1, we proposed that employees who associate the follower role with being a good citizen contribute to unethical leadership because they aim to benefit the organization. In line with this assumption, results from Study 1 showed that employees high in the IFT Good Citizen contributed to unethical leadership when the leader linked his advice to discriminate to a positive outcome for the organization (i.e., advantages of a more homogeneous group constitution). Without this link, the IFT Good Citizen was not related to discrimination. Based on Study 1, we cannot be sure whether individuals high in the IFT Good Citizen wanted to benefit the organization or simply followed the unethical leader’s advice to comply with the leader. This distinction is important as it specifies the conditions under which followers will contribute to unethical leadership.

The basic idea behind Organ’s (1988) concept of organizational citizenship behavior and Sy’s (2010) IFT Good Citizen is that a good citizen is motivated to contribute to the

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**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, Alpha Reliabilities, and Zero-Order Correlations for Study 1 Variables.

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<td>4 Romance of leadership</td>
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<td>5 Moral disengagement</td>
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<td>6 IFT Industry</td>
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<td>7 IFT Enthusiasm</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
<td>0.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 IFT Good Citizen</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.15*</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.61**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 IFT Conformity</td>
<td>4.17</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.56</td>
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<td>10 IFT Incompetence</td>
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<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.39**</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>-0.24**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.75</td>
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<td>11 IFT Insubordination</td>
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<td>0.93</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.21**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.50**</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>0.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 Immigrants selected</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>-0.17*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.12</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
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<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.17*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. IFT = implicit followership theories. N = 187 (control group n = 92; experimental group n = 95). Alpha reliabilities in italics.

*Gender 1 = male, 2 = female. Condition 0 = control group, 1 = experimental group.

*p < .05. **p < .01.

---

**Table 2.** Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Discrimination With Condition, Implicit Followership Theories (IFTs), and Their Interaction While Controlling for Personal Need for Structure (PNS), Romance of Leadership (ROL), and Moral Disengagement (MD), Study 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IFT Conformity</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Enthusiasm</th>
<th>Good Citizen</th>
<th>Insubordination</th>
<th>Incompetence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 0</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNS</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>ROL</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFT</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFT × condition</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
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<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td>.03**</td>
<td>.00*</td>
<td>.03**</td>
<td>.00*</td>
<td>.03**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 187. Condition: 0 = control group without suggestion to discriminate, 1 = experimental group with suggestion to discriminate by superior; dependent variable is number of immigrants selected, negative relations indicate less immigrants selected and therefore more discrimination.

*Male 1, female 2. Incremental validity compared with Model 0. Incremental validity compared with the respective Models 1a to 6a.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
greater good of a defined community. Therefore, followers who associate the follower role with being a good citizen differ from conformists who merely follow instructions and colluders who support unethical leaders due to selfish interests (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). We assume that individuals high in the IFT Good Citizen contribute to unethical leadership only when it is linked to positive outcomes for the community they belong to (here: the organization). This effect should, consequently, not manifest itself in situations in which a leader advises followers to contribute to unethical leadership but does not link the behavior to the good of the organization. Therefore, we expect:

**Hypothesis 3:** IFT Good Citizen moderates the relationship between a leader’s advice to contribute to unethical leadership and compliance only when the leader links this advice to positive organizational outcomes.

**Method**

**Participants.** The sample comprised 165 employees (55% female) with a mean age of 39.66 (SD = 12.39) years. Overall, 68% of the employees held entry-level positions, 15% were in lower management, and 16% were in middle or higher management. Perhaps 37% worked in small organizations of up to 20 employees, 35% worked in medium-sized organizations of 21 to 500 employees, and 27% worked in larger organizations of more than 500 employees. Different industries were represented in the sample, most of which were social and health care (25%), education (17%), industry and production (14%), and sales (9%). In contrast to Study 1, which was an online study, participants were contacted by students from the third authors’ university and received printed versions of the in-basket exercise in Study 2. We distributed an equal number of questionnaires for all three conditions. Resulting differences in participants assigned to the conditions are random.

**Procedure.** We used the same in-basket exercise as in Study 1, however, Study 2 consisted of the control condition (no advice to discriminate against immigrants) and two experimental conditions. In the first experimental condition, the CEO’s advice to discriminate against immigrants did not include any justification. In the second experimental condition, the CEO linked his advice to discriminate against immigrants to the benefit of the organization similar to Study 1. This extended design allows examining whether followers high in specific IFTs contribute to unethical leadership merely to comply with an unethical leader (Experimental Condition 1) or to benefit the company (Experimental Condition 2).

**Controlling for Alternative Explanations.** We controlled for the influence of individual differences variables that were linked to followers’ contributions to unethical behaviors in the past. Besides MD and need for structure that were already included in Study 1, we included authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996) instead of ROL in Study 2. While ROL describes the tendency to assign influence to a leader, authoritarianism refers more strongly to conformity.

The concept of authoritarianism has its roots in the authoritarian personality research that was introduced after...
World War II, trying to explain why people were influenced by unethical authorities (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Altemeyer (1996) revised the rather descriptive previous conceptualizations and introduced a conceptualization of authoritarianism comprising three dimensions, namely submissiveness to authorities, aggressiveness against norm deviants, and adherence to conventional norms. Subsequent research suggested that focusing on the specific dimensions may be more promising than considering authoritarianism as a unidimensional construct (e.g., Funke, 2005). In order to understand the tendency to contribute to unethical acts that are suggested by a leader, authoritarian submission and conservatism seem most relevant as compared with aggressiveness (see also Feldman, 2003). Individuals with a tendency to be submissive toward authorities are willing to subordinate individual autonomy to authority figures. High conventionalism is associated with a tendency to follow and support existing practices. Followers who score high on both dimensions are expected to have a rather low tendency to question suggestions made by authority figures.

Measures. We used the same measures for the IFTs with the exception of the IFT Conformity. As one item from this scale, “soft spoken,” had very low item–total correlations and thus was lowering the alpha reliability of the scale, we discussed alternative translations and changed the wording into “docile.”

To assess contributions to unethical leadership, we created two scores. One score was identical to the one used in Study 1 and accounted for the total number of immigrants selected. A second score adjusted the selection score based on the order of preference. Participants were asked to put the three recommended applicants in an order with the most highly recommended applicant first. Therefore, the position that foreign applicants were assigned to provides additional information. A participant may, for example, based on social desirability include a foreign applicant in the list, but, assign him or her a lower ranking. In the adjusted score, an individual who ranked an immigrant on position 1 was assigned 3 points; 2 points for ranking an immigrant on position 2, and 1 point for ranking an immigrant on position 3. Thus, values for the adjusted second score ranged from 0 (no foreign applicants selected) to 6 points (three foreign applicants selected), with lower numbers indicating more discrimination.

We assessed control variables MD and need for structure using the same scales as in Study 1. Authoritarian submission and conventionalism were measured with the respective three-item subscales of a German version (Beierlein, Asbrock, Kauff, & Schmidt, 2014) of Altemeyer’s authoritarianism scale (Altemeyer, 1996). Example items were “We should be grateful for having leaders who tell us exactly what we should do” for submissiveness and “Established practices should not be questioned” for conventionalism.

Results
Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics, alpha reliabilities, and zero-order correlations among the variables. As can be seen, on average, participants selected 1.32 immigrants. A one-way ANOVA revealed that the difference between the groups representing the three conditions of the experiment was significant, $F(2, 162) = 15.66, p < .01$. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey’s HSD test indicated that the total number of selected immigrants was significantly lower in the second experimental group ($M = 1.02, SD = 0.45$) compared with the control group ($M = 1.55, SD = 0.54; p < .01$) and the first experimental group ($M = 1.37, SD = 0.56; p < .01$). There was no statistically significant difference between the control condition and the first experimental condition ($p = .17$) in which the superior’s advice (i.e., discrimination) was not linked to the good of the organization.

As the total number of selected immigrants masks whether immigrants were selected as first, second, or third choice, we created an additional, more specific measure as a second criterion. More specifically, we assigned more points to higher rankings. As expected and mirroring the effects for the total number of selected immigrants, the score for the second experimental group ($M = 1.88, SD = 1.13$) was lower than the score for the control group ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.24$) and the first experimental group ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.38$). A one-way ANOVA showed that this difference was significant, $F(2, 162) = 18.43, p < .01$. Notably, for the adjusted score, there was also a statistically significant difference between the control condition and the first experimental condition ($p = .03$). Thus, both scores indicate that participants who received the advice from their superior not to select immigrants as potential job candidates choose fewer immigrants, and this tendency was particularly low if the leader linked his unethical advice to the good of the organization. To replicate findings of Study 1, we conducted multiple regression analyses including the z-standardized scores of the IFTs and condition (which included the two conditions we had in Study 1, namely Control condition and Experimental Condition 2) in Step 1 along with the control variables. In the second step, we included the interaction between Condition and the respective IFTs. Similar to Study 1, there was no interaction effect for the IFTs Conformity, Enthusiasm, and Industry. Analogous to Study 1 and (again) supporting Hypothesis 1, including the interaction between Condition and the IFT Good Citizen increased the explained variance. Using the adjusted score as dependent variable revealed the same results, $\Delta R^2 = .03\%, \beta = -.17, p = .04$.

As our Study 2 design included a multicategorical predictor variable, we used the PROCESS version 2.15 macro Model 1 as described in Hayes and Montoya (2016) to test
Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, Alpha Reliabilities, and Zero-Order Correlations for Study 2 Variables.

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<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. IFT = implicit followership theory. N = 164 (control group n = 57; Experimental Group 1, n = 51; Experimental Group 2, n = 56). Alpha reliabilities in italics.


dMale = 1, female = 2. Number of immigrants selected, immigrants selected indicate more discrimination. Adjusted score for number of immigrants selected in which order of selection is considered. Condition was coded 1 = no advice to discriminate, 2 = leader’s advice to discriminate not linked to the good of the company, and 3 = leader’s advice to discriminate linked to the good of the company.

*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01.

Table 4. Regressions of Type of Condition (no Advice to Discriminate, Advice not Linked to the Good of the Company, Advice Linked to the Good of the Company) on Number of Immigrants Selected (Lower Number Indicate Discrimination) When Employees’ Implicit Followership Theory (IFT) Good Citizen is the Moderator, Study 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>LLCI</th>
<th>ULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>0.09</td>
<td>−0.44</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>−0.21</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>−0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral disengagement</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>−0.31</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>−0.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for structure</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
<td>0.26</td>
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<td>Authoritarian submission</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
<td>−0.34</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>−0.10</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
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<td>Conventionalism</td>
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<td>−2.49</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>−0.20</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
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<td>IFT Good Citizen</td>
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<td>0.09</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>−0.20</td>
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<td>−1.74</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>−0.42</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2</td>
<td>−0.58</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>−5.81</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>−0.78</td>
<td>−0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D1 × IFT Good Citizen</td>
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<td>0.16</td>
<td>−0.18</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>−0.34</td>
<td>0.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>D2 × IFT Good Citizen</td>
<td>−0.22</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>−2.14</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>−0.42</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. b = unstandardized beta weight; SE = standard error; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; D1 = Experimental Condition 1 = 1 and Control Condition and Experimental Condition 2 = 0; D2 = Experimental Condition 2 = 1 and Control Condition and Experimental Condition 1 = 0.

Hypothesis 3. In this model, the type of condition was entered as predictor, the IFT Good Citizen as the moderator, and number of immigrants selected as the outcome variable. Gender, age, MD, need for structure, and the two authoritarianism dimensions were included as control variables. We used the condition with no advice given by the superior as control condition; and PROCESS created two condition dummy variables: D1 coding the first experimental condition (i.e., the condition in which the superior’s advice was not linked to the good of the organization was coded 1, and the other two conditions were coded 0), and D2 coding the second experimental condition (i.e., the condition in which the superior linked his unethical advice to the good of the organization was coded 1, and the other two conditions were coded 0). Results are shown in Table 4.

PROCESS outputs showed an R² for the unconstrained model of R² = .24, F(11, 150) = 4.52, p < .01. Test of moderation shows a change in R² resulting from adding both product terms of ΔR² = .02, F(2, 150) = 2.48, p = .09. Supporting Hypothesis 3, the product term of D2 by IFT...
Good Citizen was significant ($b = -.22$, standard error [SE] = .10, $p = .03$), whereas the product term of $D_1$ by IFT Good Citizen was not ($b = -.03$, SE = .16, $p = .85$). When using the adjusted score, the results were similar with slightly stronger effects: $R^2$ for the unconstrained model was .28, $F(11, 150) = 6.02$, $p < .01$. Test of moderation showed a change in $R^2$ resulting from adding both product terms of $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 150) = 2.65$, $p = .07$. Supporting Hypothesis 3, the product term of $D_1$ by IFT Good Citizen was significant ($b = -.57$, SE = .26, $p = .03$), whereas the product term of $D_1$ by IFT Good Citizen was not ($b = -.07$, SE = .34, $p = .84$). To visualize the differences in the interaction effects, we plotted the slopes for the control condition and the two experimental conditions in Figure 3.

Simple slope analysis revealed that when it was linked to the good of the company, a superior’s advice to discriminate decreased the number of immigrants selected for employees low in IFT Good Citizen ($-1 SD$, $b = -3.9$, SE = .15, $t = -2.63$, $p < .01$) and high in IFT Good Citizen ($+1 SD$, $b = -78$, SE = .12, $t = -6.35$, $p < .001$). When the superior’s advice was not linked to the good of the company (Experimental Condition 1), it decreased neither the number of selected immigrants for employees’ low in IFT Good Citizen ($-1 SD$, $b = -1.7$, SE = .18, $t = -0.94$, $p = .35$) nor high in IFT Good Citizen ($+1 SD$, $b = -2.2$, SE = .18, $t = -1.26$, $p = .21$).

**Discussion**

Study 2 results replicate findings of Study 1 for the IFT Good Citizen with a different control variable and an additional adjusted score for the dependent variable. To address potential method and sample effects, we used a more mature sample and conducted the in-basket exercise as a paper-and-pencil version instead of online assessment. More important, the extended experimental design specifies the conditions under which the IFT Good Citizen relates to unethical leadership. The pattern of results shown in Figure 3 suggest that higher values in the IFT Good Citizen increase followers’ tendency to contribute to unethical leadership only if the leader links unethical requests to the good of the company.

**General Discussion**

In two studies, we examined how implicit assumptions regarding the follower role as measured by IFTs influence the tendency to contribute to unethical leadership. In Study 1, we found that participants who score high on the IFT Good Citizen were more likely and those scoring high on the IFT Insubordination were less likely to comply with a leader’s advice to discriminate in a personnel selection decision. In Study 2, we could replicate the findings for the IFT Good Citizen. Study 2 results furthermore showed that employees who scored high on the IFT Good Citizen only comply when the leader linked his unethical advice with the benefit of the organization. When the leader merely advised to conduct unethical behavior, the IFT Good Citizen was not related to follower compliance. The pattern of results indicates that employees who associate the follower role with being a good citizen may contribute to unethical leadership under specific circumstances.

In sum, our research suggests that considering implicit theories enriches our understanding of followers’ involvement in unethical organizational practices. Note that the proposed unique effect of the IFT Good Citizen held when controlling for a number of alternative explanations, (a) the tendency to displace responsibility to a leader (ROL), (b) the preference for social conformity (Authoritarianism), (c) the tendency to mentally reframe the situation so that it appears as less immoral (MD), and (d) cognitive rigidity (PNS). The specific findings with regard to the way the IFT Good Citizen was linked to the experimental conditions furthermore suggest considering IFTs as a variable whose meaning emerges within context. For example, employees might construct the follower role not merely in reference to the leader but also in reference to the organization they want to benefit.

**Implications for the Understanding of (Followers’ Contribution to) Unethical Leadership**

Our findings provide evidence for the argument (e.g., Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Padilla et al., 2007) that
followers’ role in unethical leadership is not restricted to being a victim or a passive bystander, but that they actively contribute to unethical outcomes. Notably, followers who contributed to unethical leadership were not the ones high in negatively connoted characteristics as it has been suggested by prior research (e.g., Thoroughgood et al., 2012) but those who associated the follower role with a positive value (i.e., the good citizen image). This finding supports and extends prior research and theory that suggested a potential downside of positive employee characteristics (Judge et al., 2009; Umphress & Bingham, 2010). The meaning of follower characteristics seems to reveal itself when considered in interaction with situational demands.

In addition to showing that susceptibility to unethical leadership does not always require embracing negative traits or motives, our findings indicate that involvement in unethical leadership is not necessarily the result of a conscious decision to contribute to a negative process (e.g., to avoid negative consequences for oneself and/or approach personal gains; Padilla et al., 2007). In line with recent developments in the field of behavioral ethics (Haidt, 2001; Reynolds et al., 2010), our findings suggest that the elaboration-based view on (un)ethical behavior needs to be complemented by considering more automatic information processes involved in decision making and behavior. By showing the influence of implicit theories (here: IFTs) in the unfolding of unethical acts (here: discrimination), our findings suggest that subtle and insidious facilitators (Barth, 1997, Detert & Edmondson, 2011) may also increase susceptibility to unethical leadership.

**Implications for Research on Implicit Followership Theories**

Our results enrich the existing knowledge about IFTs as we provided evidence that IFTs do not only influence how followers are perceived by leaders as shown in prior research (e.g., Whiteley, Sy, & Johnson, 2012) but also influence how followers behave. Our research also emphasizes that it might be useful to rethink whether the IFTs as suggested by Sy (2010) are exhaustive. For example, Sy’s IFT dimensions do not cover attributes associated with courageous followership and constructive dissent (Chaleff, 1995; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007). As a consequence, only the IFT Insubordination emerged as a predictor of refusal to follow an unethical leader’s suggestion in Study 1. However, associating followership with being “arrogant” and “rude” is hardly something one would recommend organizations to encourage among their workforce. Hence, a more comprehensive approach to followership theories should include forms of challenging the status quo that are more compatible with reasonable organizational practice. Notably, indicators of such a facet did occur in Sy’s prestudies but the respective items were omitted during the scale development process. Besides considering these items, further attempts could draw on Carsten et al.’s (2010) findings that followers construct their role not only along the dimensions of passive and active but also as proactive. This notion is reflected in categories such as integrity, expressing opinions, and taking ownership. Finally, an extended spectrum of IFTs could cover more controversial facets of follower characteristics and behaviors without labeling them as negative (see Collinson, 2006, for a discussion on a broader spectrum of possible follower identities).

Our attempts to specify the conditions under which followers comply with a leader’s unethical advice contribute to the debate on whether to view followers as part of a hierarchical relationship (i.e., the leader–follower dyad) or as cocreators of a leadership process (Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The finding that followers who scored high on the IFT Good Citizen only complied with the leader’s unethical advice when it was linked to benefitting the organization suggests that followers construct their role not merely in reference to the leader but as part of the organizational context. Consequently, the context may not only function as moderating the relationship between follower characteristics and outcomes but to codetermine how followers construct their role (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Our findings indicate that followers’ positive associations with the follower role may lead to negative outcomes. However, we only examined one form of unethical behavior (i.e., discrimination) and one way in which followers contribute to unethical leadership (i.e., by following a leader’s advice not to select immigrants). Although situations in which followers actively contribute to unethical leadership are more dangerous compared with acts of omission, it is not clear which IFTs might be relevant in the latter. For example, conformity, which did not relate to participants’ discriminating behavior in our study, might contribute to more passive forms of unethical followership such as remaining silent when observing a leader’s unethical behavior (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012). We furthermore focused on an ambivalent situation which allowed the participants to view the unethical act in a positive light (i.e., as it was proposed to benefit the company). Note that we did not create a situation to trap participants, but to highlight the susceptibility of well-meaning followers in moral grey zones, “situations that are morally ambiguous and in which leaders and followers together engage in practices that are likely to harm others, yet might benefit the organization, the follower, or the leader” (Knoll et al., 2016, p. 66; see also Antebey, 2008). Future research could examine whether the results differ when followers are asked to contribute to clearly unethical acts such as theft or bullying.
We are aware that our methodological approach using an experimental design to examine the interaction between an unethical leader’s advice and follower IFTs might raise questions regarding the external validity (Gorman, Clover, & Doherty, 1978) and demand effects (Orne, 2009; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 2009). Demand effects would suggest that, in the treatment condition, participants were doing simply what they were told to do as a function of what makes sense for the organization in a hypothetical situation. However, the differentiated results somewhat alleviate this possibility. Note that we found the effects for the IFT Good Citizen only (and not for the IFT Industry, for example) and only in one of the two experimental conditions in Study 2. We cannot say whether participants might act differently when they receive instructions from an actual superior. However, in a simulation, participants could quite easily refuse to comply with an unethical leader whereas at their workplace, when they have a psychologically significant relationship with their supervisor and a rejection may result in negative consequences, their behavior might be even more compliant. As discussed in more detail by Petersen and Krings (2009), in simulations, the tendency to follow authorities might be underestimated rather than overestimated. Thus, although evidence exists that the paradigm we used (i.e., in-basket exercise) can realistically simulate the actual decision making environments of managers (Bartol & Martin, 1990) and has been used in research on unethical behavior before (e.g., Brief et al., 2000; Reynolds et al., 2010), our findings are just a first step in establishing the role of IFTs as influencing unethical work behavior. The next steps will include further replications, ideally implemented in the work context.

Finally, our research is a first attempt at showing that IFTs, in our case, the IFT Good Citizen, can have detrimental effects as they enticed followers’ into contributing to unethical leadership, if their leader framed his request in a way that it supposedly benefits the organization. At this stage, we only know that IFTs affect employees’ decisions (here: to discriminate); future research needs to specify at which stage of the decision-making process (Rest, 1986) this impact occurs. For example, did participants with high values in IFT Good Citizen notice that discriminating against immigrants was an unethical act but complied with the leader’s request anyway? Or, alternatively, did their IFTs bias their perception of the situation in a way that they did not think there was an ethical issue (Moore & Gino, 2013; Reynolds, 2006)? Even more subtle, their IFTs could bias participants’ perception of applicants’ qualification for the job. Future research could extend our paradigm to examine the stages of (un)ethical decision-making processes in more detail. Awareness of an ethical issue, for example, could be assessed by including a section in which participants rate whether they view preferring domestic applicants over better qualified immigrants as unethical (see Knoll et al., 2016, for a similar procedure). Potentially biased perception of applicants’ qualifications could be assessed by including a section in which participants rate the qualification of each applicant (see Petersen & Dietz, 2000, 2008).

Conclusion

Interpretations of classical social psychological studies and historical cases of unethical leadership (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Arendt, 1963; Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Milgram, 1974) suggest that merely accepting the follower role and being confronted with a leader’s advice triggers obedience. However, not everyone contributed to unethical outcomes in the same way, neither in historical situations nor in psychological experiments (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Reicher & Haslam, 2006). Moreover, historians and sociologists (e.g., Bauman, 1989; Browning, 1992; Hilberg, 1992) question the commonsense assumption that only bad people do bad things emphasizing the need to understand why and how “ordinary men” contribute to unethical practices in general and unethical leadership in particular. In this article, we combined research into unethical behavior and followership to examine further which characteristics of followers (in this case, their IFTs) make them susceptible to unethical leadership. We examined employees’ contribution to unethical leadership as the result of a sense-making process that depends on followers’ active (but not necessarily conscious) construction of the follower role. We showed that, as this construction involves the interaction of person characteristics and contextual variables, the meaning of follower characteristics and their consequences may change depending on the configuration of context and situation.

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