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RESEARCH REPORT

When Are Transgressing *Leaders* Punitively Judged? An Empirical Test

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Using Hollander's (1958) idiosyncrasy credit theory of leadership as the theoretical backdrop, we examined when and why organizational leaders escape punitive evaluation for their organizational transgressions. In a sample of 162 full-time employees, we found that leaders who were perceived to be more able and inspirationally motivating were less punitively evaluated by employees for leader transgressions. These effects were mediated by the leaders' LMX (leader–member exchange) with their employees. Moreover, the tendency of leaders with higher LMX to escape punitive evaluations for their transgressions was stronger when those leaders were more valued within the organization. Finally, employees who punitively evaluated their leaders were more likely to have turnover intentions and to psychologically withdraw from their organization. Theoretical and practical implications associated with relatively understudied leader-transgression dynamics are discussed.

Keywords: leadership, LMX, deviance, punitiveness

Sadly, it is a matter of record that leaders of Fortune 500 corporations such as Enron, Worldcom, Tyco, and others have engaged in immoral behavior, evidenced by myriad examples discussed by Joshi, Anand, and Henderson (2007) and Lipman-Blumen (2005) and by a rich description of the demise of Enron in particular (cf. Eichenwald, 2005). Less extreme in severity, but still of concern, are leaders' transgressions—that is, leaders' actions, at work, whose appropriateness is questionable when judged by norms associated with workplace-related policies, procedures, or practices and/or with codes of interpersonal conduct (cf. Bies, 2001).

Examples of leader transgressions when judged by typical norms of interpersonal sensitivity include behaviors such as disrespectful remarks or loss of temper that have been referred to as *workplace offenses* (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001, 2006), *abusive supervision* (Tepper et al., 2009; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008), *interactional injustice* (Bies & Shapiro, 1987, 1988), or, more broadly, *antisocial behaviors* (O'Leary-Kelly, Duffy, & Griffin, 2000; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998; Shapiro, Duffy, Kim, Lean, & O'Leary-Kelly, 2008). Examples of leader transgressions when judged by typical norms set by workplace-related policies, procedures, or practices include behaviors such as procedural inconsistency or capriciousness that have been referred to as examples of *procedural injustice* (see Colquitt, 2001, for a review). When any of these leader transgressions are unequivocally immoral, illegal, or deviant, these actions have been referred to as examples of *unethical leader behavior* (cf. D. M. Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009) or *workplace deviance* (cf. Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Tepper et al., 2008, 2009). We use the term *leader transgression* to encompass all of these actions when they occur on the part of organizations' leaders in interactions that leaders have with any stakeholder of the organization (e.g., subordinates, peers, higher authorities, board members, shareholders, customers, potential customers, suppliers, and/or job applicants). The fact that leader transgressions, as defined here, occur at work means that these actions are likely to raise questions about how appropriately a leader is behaving as an organizational leader.

Theorizing and empirical work regarding the need to discipline employees tends to focus not on organizational leaders but rather on nonsupervisory employees (cf. Litzky, Eddleston, & Kidder, 2006) or subordinates (e.g., Arvey, Davis, & Nelson, 1984; Arvey

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We take this opportunity to remember and thank Debra Shapiro's father, Herbert Shapiro, who died January 2009 and who kept assuring us during the multiple iterations of the review process that this "A" would come.

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& Ivancevich, 1980; Ball, Treviño, & Sims, 1994; Tepper et al., 2008, 2009; Treviño & Ball, 1992). As a result, the scholarly management literature is relatively silent about dynamics associated with leader transgression. We recognize that the dearth of studies on leader transgression is probably due to the difficulty in gaining approval from organizational authorities (whose endorsement is often needed for organizational entry) to study dynamics associated with organizational leaders' transgressions.

We fill this important gap by using idiosyncrasy credit theory (Hollander, 1958) as the conceptual backdrop to identify and examine the antecedents and consequences of employees' punitive evaluations of transgressing leaders. We focus on employees' punitive evaluations as the primary dependent variable because the success of leaders depends on sustained commitment and support from their followers, which are less likely to occur when employees judge their leaders punitively (cf. Bies & Shapiro, 1987, 1988; Hollander, 1958; Tyler & Blader, 2000). Moreover, employees' punitiveness toward a transgressing leader in their organization may be associated with negative work-related attitudes (i.e., turnover intentions) and/or negative work-related behaviors (i.e., psychological withdrawal; cf. Lehman & Simpson, 1992) and, consequently, has important organizational implications. Figure 1 visually summarizes our conceptual model.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Will employees punitively evaluate transgressing leaders? Guidance in answering this question is provided by Hollander's (1958) idiosyncrasy credit theory of leadership. This theory recognizes that when leaders have more rather than fewer positive attributes, employees tend to give them more latitude to behave idiosyncratically—that is, to deviate from norms. Hollander explained that this greater latitude was due to leaders' accumulation of idiosyncrasy credit, which he also likened to a credit balance and described to be a positive summation of leaders' desirable attributes (hence captured by positive affect for leaders). Similarly, Phillips, Rothbard, and Dumas (2009, p. 722) have recently described idiosyncrasy credits to be "the accumulation of positive impressions of an individual acquired through achievements or past behavior, which are associated with greater ability to deviate from expectations without sanctions." Two leader attributes that are likely sources for idiosyncrasy credit are (a) leaders' ability/competence in general and (b) leaders' skill in communicating in inspirationally motivating ways.

Our reasons for focusing on these two leader attributes as sources for idiosyncrasy credit are many. First, at a minimum, leaders are expected to be favorably distinct from others in their level of competence and in their ability to inspire others to listen to them (cf. Chemers, 1997). Second, past research has indicated that leaders who radiate an aura of competence and are able to communicate their vision and goals in inspirationally motivational terms often engender feelings of personal attachment, positive affect, and trust toward the leader (e.g., Bono & Ilies, 2006; Erez, Misangyi, Johnson, LePine, & Halverson, 2008; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). Indeed, the strength of positive affect typically felt by people in the presence of such leaders has been likened to reverence and awe and to love with enthusiasm (Jayakody, 2008). Similarly, Hollander (1958) described greater loyalty (or a higher credit balance) as a consequence of leaders exhibiting more rather than less competence. Cumulatively, the latter findings suggest that employees who view their organization's leaders as more competent and inspirationally motivating will more positively evaluate leaders' contributions and express stronger loyalty, respect, and/or trust for the leaders, aspects that potentially indicate the level of the leaders' idiosyncrasy credit (cf. Stone & Cooper, 2009).

Given that "no metric exists for determining the individual's credit balance" (Stone & Cooper, 2009, p. 791), we use LMX (i.e., leader–member exchange), which directly represents employees' trust, respect, and felt obligation/loyalty toward the leader (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), as a key indicator of a leader's idiosyncrasy credit with his or her employees. Employees' ratings of LMX reflect feelings and cognitions they have of leaders that stem from their working relationship as opposed to stemming from personal or friendship-based relationships (cf. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Among the positive summary evaluations that comprise the LMX construct are the extent to which employees are willing to defend their leaders' decisions, hence view them as competent and feel loyal, and the extent to which employees perceive leaders as likely to bail them out and be helpful in solving employees' work problems, thus benevolent or trustworthy (cf. Dienesch & Liden,

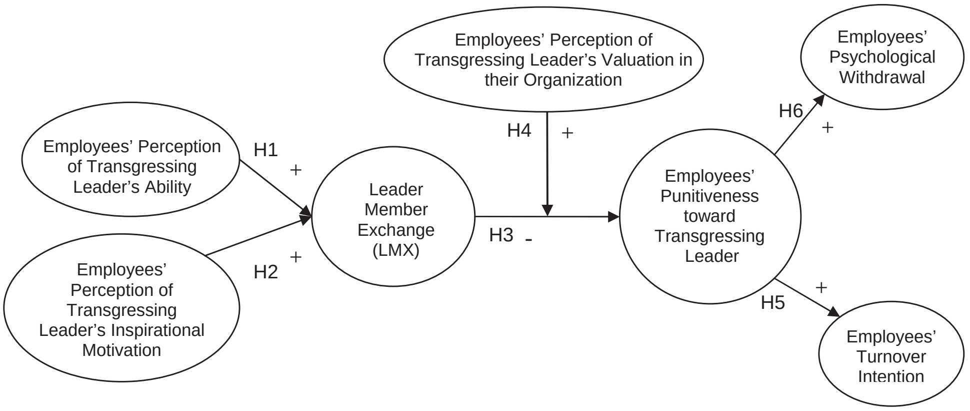
Employees' Perception of Transgressing Leader's Valuation in their Organization
Employees' Psychological Withdrawal
H6
+
Employees' Perception of Transgressing Leader's Ability
H1
+
H4
+
Leader Member Exchange (LMX)
H3
-
Employees' Punitiveness toward Transgressing Leader
Employees' Perception of Transgressing Leader's Inspirational Motivation
H2
+
H5
+
Employees' Turnover Intention

Figure 1. Theorized model of factors influencing punitiveness toward a transgressing organizational leader. H = hypothesis.

1986; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX thus captures a summation of the positive evaluation that employees have of their leaders and, therefore, is potentially a useful indicator of leaders' idiosyncrasy credit with their employees. Furthermore, these more positive evaluations, or higher LMX, are more likely to result when the leaders are seen to have favorable attributes such as higher ability and inspirational motivation (e.g., Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999); as such, we propose that LMX acts as a key mechanism that enables leaders who have high ability and/or are inspirationally motivating to behave idiosyncratically, hence to receive lower levels of punitive evaluation for their transgressions. In summary, we hypothesize the following:

> *Hypothesis 1:* Leaders' perceived ability is positively related to leaders' LMX.
>
> *Hypothesis 2:* Leaders' inspirational motivation is positively related to leaders' LMX.
>
> *Hypothesis 3:* Leaders' LMX mediates the negative effects of leaders' perceived ability and inspirational motivation on punitive evaluation of leaders' transgressions.

The last hypothesis states that leaders' LMX is key in explaining why the more able and more inspirationally motivating leaders tend to be less punitively evaluated for their transgressions. In so doing, the hypothesis also suggests that higher LMX leaders will generally be less punitively evaluated for their transgressions. However, we posit that the tendency for higher LMX leaders to escape punitive evaluation ought to be weaker for leaders whose followers perceive them to be less (rather than more) valued by others in their organization, especially by organizational authorities. This is because employees' sense of behavioral appropriateness, or norms, at work is frequently guided by the behaviors engaged in by others who are considered important and respected in the organization (cf. Markham & McKee, 1995). Furthermore, employees tend to behave in ways that match the norms they see organizational authorities rewarding, commending, and/or not punishing (cf. D. M. Mayer et al., 2009; also see Aquino, Douglas & Martinko, 2004; Dekker & Barling, 1998; Victor & Cullen, 1988). In fact, this norm-matching tendency of employees, especially in the context of antisocial behaviors, has been termed *monkey see, monkey do* (e.g., Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). If followers perceive leaders who have transgressed to be strongly supported in their organization, employees ought to be more likely to match this behavior too, hence be less likely to view the transgressions as worthy of punitive evaluation. These reasons suggest that the negative association between leaders' LMX and the punitiveness with which employees evaluate them for transgressing should be stronger for leaders who are also seen by their employees as strongly valued within the organization. Thus, we predict the following:

> *Hypothesis 4:* The negative relationship between leaders' LMX and the punitive evaluation of their transgressions is stronger for leaders who are perceived to be more valued in their organizations.

When employees decide that an organizational leader is deserving of punitive evaluation, how does this affect their work-related attitudes and/or behaviors? Punitive evaluation, by definition, includes a desire to see the target harmed or punished. However, given that employees often have little direct power to punish leaders who are higher in the organization's hierarchy, it is likely that they engage in more subtle forms of noncooperation such as withholding effort, leaving work early for unnecessary reasons, spending time working on personal rather than work-related matters on the job, and shirking responsibility for work—behaviors that Lehman and Simpson (1992) termed *psychological withdrawal behaviors.* Moreover, employees wishing to punish leaders may actively ruminate about seeking alternative employment and develop strong desires to quit (cf. Mowday, Koberg, & McArthur, 1984). Because organizational leaders are often seen as representatives, or agents, of the organization (e.g., Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002), employees sometimes express negative feelings they have for leaders, such as retaliatory desires, by harming the organization (cf. Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), for example, by engaging in psychological withdrawal behaviors and/or planning to leave the organization. Indirect support for this comes from Skarlicki and Folger's (1997) finding reduced work effort and Tyler and Blader's (2000) finding lower levels of organizational engagement and commitment on the part of employees who evaluated leaders' actions negatively (i.e., as unfair). Cumulatively, then, we predict the following:

> *Hypothesis 5:* Employees' punitive evaluation of their leaders' transgressions is positively related to their turnover intentions.
>
> *Hypothesis 6:* Employees' punitive evaluation of their leaders' transgressions is positively related to their psychological withdrawal behaviors.

Method

Sample

Participants were drawn from a population of 182 full-time employees who were enrolled in an introductory management course that was offered in a part-time business administration master's degree program at a mid-Atlantic university in the United States. Incentivized by an opportunity to earn extra credit, 162 class members participated by completing two 20-min surveys (2 weeks apart), yielding a response rate of 89%. The 162 participants (whose average age was 30.3 years) consisted of top managers ($N = 4$), middle-level managers ($N = 32$), lower level managers ($N = 43$), and nonmanagers ($N = 83$); 71% males; 79% U.S. citizens; and the following ethnicities: White (50.6%), Asian or Asian American (34%), African American (4.3%), Hispanic (1.2%), Middle Eastern (1.9%), mixed race (1.9%), or other (6.2%).

Sample Recruitment and Survey Administration Procedure

The target population received an e-mail, sent and signed by the instructor's research assistant (RA), that introduced the RA as the manager of a work experience study and invited their help in completing a 20-min web-linked survey on two occasions (2 weeks apart). In this e-mail, participants were assured of confidentiality of the data and told that all personal identifying information would be removed once all the surveys were received back. One of the surveys contained the outcome variables (i.e., employees' turnover intentions and psychological withdrawal behaviors) and control variables pertaining to respondent characteristics. The other survey contained predictor and control variables pertaining to the transgressing leader's qualities, including transgression-related descriptors and leader demographics (named in our Measures section). Half of the sample received the survey containing the leader-related assessments first, and the other half received this survey second (i.e., the surveys were counterbalanced). We dummy-coded the survey administration variable and checked to see if counterbalancing the survey changed the pattern of results; the pattern of relationships (reported in our Results section) remained the same. Additionally, the order of items within each survey was varied to avoid any consistency effects in the way the participants responded to the items (e.g., Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, the survey items assessing leader qualities were always preceded by the leader-transgression–related stimulus instruction (described in the next section). This order was necessary to examine how, as our theoretical model in Figure 1 illustrates, transgressing leaders are evaluated when they have more or fewer positive attributes that lead to more rather than less positive affect for them specifically.

Leader-Transgression Stimulus Instruction

To study employees' reactions to transgressing leaders and how qualities of these leaders influence these reactions required us to cue participants to think about a specific leader-transgressor in their organization (as opposed to organizational leaders in general). Specifically, the survey asked participants to think about a leader in their employing organization who had

> done something that caused them to feel *disappointed in him/her as a leader* due to actions *at work* whose appropriateness was questionable. Such actions might include seeming dishonest in communications and/or in record-keeping involving himself/herself or other employees, deviating from a work-related rule or norm, breaching confidentiality promised to you or other employees, violating privacy, misbehaving or disobeying work-related instructions, showing a lapse in judgment, and/or doing anything else in the workplace that led you to feel let down or *disappointed in this leader*.

Following this, we asked participants to open-endedly describe what their leader had done. Content coding of these open-ended descriptions, conducted by two coders unfamiliar with the study's hypotheses (whose percentage of agreement was 93%), resulted in the six transgression categories shown in Table 1. Moreover, the content analysis showed that the organizational leaders identified in transgression-descriptions included "my coworker/colleague/team member" ($N = 7$), "my boss/supervisor" ($N = 94$), "my boss's boss" ($N = 9$), and "senior manager/the CEO" ($N = 4$); the nonhierarchical-referents of "he," "she," or "this leader" occurred in the remaining descriptions of leader transgressions. Consequently, over half of the leader-transgressors were just one or two hierarchical levels above the participants. Leaders were thus probably hierarchically close enough to participants to be negatively affected by participants' expressed punitiveness toward them (e.g., via turnover intentions or psychological withdrawal). Moreover, Table 1 shows dishonesty as the leader action most frequently named by a wide margin that led participants to feel let down or disappointed in their leader. Therefore, future theorizing and studies associated with transgressing-leader–related dynamics may be

Table 1
Qualitatively Coded Leader Transgressions and Frequencies

Category	Definition	Frequency
Absenteeism/negligence of duty	Statements that refer to the leader neglecting duties and/or being absent from the workplace during expected work hours/days; for example, arriving late to work, not showing up for work regularly and without reason.	13
Verbal or physical abusiveness	Statements that refer to the leader mistreating employees in public or in private; for example, screaming at employees, using profanity/offensive language, throwing objects at employees.	22
Discrimination, demographically oriented differential treatment	Statements that refer to the leader treating some employees more favorably or unfavorably than others based on employees' affiliation with a group or distinguishing characteristic; for example, treating female subordinates differently from male subordinates, making inappropriate racial comments at workplace functions.	9
Favoritism, relationally oriented differential treatment	Statements that refer to the leader treating some subordinates, customers, or vendors more favorably or unfavorably than others based on a positive relationship; for example, granting lucrative contracts to friends and family members, allowing favored subordinates to break rules with impunity.	14
Dishonesty	Statements that refer to the leader lying or intentionally misleading others; for example, lying on reports; taking credit for another's accomplishments; omitting or withholding pertinent information from superiors, coworkers, subordinates, and/or customers to mislead others or to ensure a beneficial outcome.	66
Incompetence	Statements that refer to the leader displaying a lack of intellectual ability or qualifications for the duties he or she had been assigned; for example, not following proper procedures during the performance of his or her duties, delegating decision making to nonqualified personnel.	19
Interpersonal sabotage	Statements that refer to the leader undermining others for personal reasons; for example, preventing subordinates from getting promotions to ensure that they stay in his or her department, intentionally undermining coworker projects.	13
Miscellaneous	Statements whose substance was too nonspecific to enable category selection; for example, "s/he is a jerk."	6

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Employee's age	30.3	4.48	—						
2. Employee's gender	0.29	0.46	−.13	—					
3. Employee's ethnicity	5.62	2.97	−.14	−.12	—				
4. Ethnic similarity with leader	1.51	0.50	.13	.03	−.54**	—			
5. Employee's positive affect	3.65	0.62	.12	−.07	−.04	−.01	(.86)		
6. Employee's negative affect	1.99	0.70	−.06	.04	.15	.05	−.28**	(.88)	
7. Employee's religiosity	4.06	1.60	−.10	.03	−.07	.14	.00	−.03	(.94)
8. Employee's power distance	2.28	0.94	−.25**	−.05	.05	−.01	−.24**	.25**	.18*
9. Employee's social desirability	1.39	0.21	−.13	−.01	.25**	−.27**	−.22**	.18*	−.08
10. Leader's gender	0.27	0.44	−.15	.14	−.03	−.03	−.10	.09	−.03
11. Leader's management level	2.36	0.92	.01	−.12	−.16*	.17*	−.18*	.04	.08
12. Offense severity	6.50	2.61	.07	.04	−.13	.02	.18*	−.13	.04
13. Recency of transgression	2.78	1.20	.16*	−.03	−.11	.09	−.02	−.15	.02
14. Leader apologized	1.83	1.53	−.08	−.06	.00	−.04	−.04	−.03	.14
15. Leader's ability	4.39	1.62	−.08	−.02	.08	−.17*	.10	−.03	.07
16. Leader's inspirational motivation	4.22	1.59	−.05	−.04	.10	−.11	.17*	.04	.10
17. Leader–member exchange	3.78	1.30	−.18*	−.08	.06	−.07	.18*	.04	.14
18. Leader's perceived valuation	4.74	1.50	−.03	.10	−.03	−.07	.09	.09	.19*
19. Employee's punitiveness toward transgressing leader	3.33	1.22	.13	−.05	.00	.00	−.05	−.04	−.13
20. Employee's turnover intentions	4.39	1.77	−.05	−.00	.07	−.04	−.06	.09	.02
21. Employee's psychological withdrawal	2.62	0.68	−.20**	−.03	.24**	−.17*	−.21**	.13	−.20**

Note. $N = 162$. Scale reliabilities appear along the diagonal in parentheses.
* $p < .05$, two-tailed. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

informed by literatures associated with deception dynamics (cf. Shapiro, Lewicki, & Devine, 1995) or betrayal dynamics (cf. Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998) and by literatures associated with (in)authentic leadership (cf. Harvey, Martinko, & Gardner, 2006; May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003).

Measures

All measures used to assess the predictor and endogenous variables shown in Figure 1 were measured with 7-point scales (where 1= *strongly disagree* and 7= *strongly agree*), except where noted. All control variables were measured using the prescribed scales by the authors listed.

Leader's ability. Participants assessed the leader's ability by indicating how strongly they agreed with the six statements comprising R. C. Mayer and Davis's (1999) ability-related subscale of trust. Sample items include "This leader is very capable of performing his/her job" and "This leader is well qualified."

Leader's inspirational motivation. Participants assessed the leader's inspirational motivation by indicating how strongly they agreed with the four items comprising the Inspirational Motivation subscale of the Transformational Leadership Scale created by Bass and Avolio (1995). A sample item is "This leader talks optimistically about the future."

Leader–member exchange (LMX). Participants assessed the quality of the leadership relationship by indicating how strongly they agreed with the content of the seven items comprising the LMX-7 scale (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Example items are "Regardless of how much formal authority this leader has built into his/ her position, this leader would use his/ her power to help me solve problems in my work," and "I have enough confidence in this leader that I would defend and justify his/her decision if he/she were not present to do so."

Leader's valuation in their organization. Participants assessed the leader's valuation in their organization by indicating how strongly they agreed with three items taken from Eisenberger et al.'s (2002) scale of "supervisor's organizational status" that these authors identified as relating to "the organization's valuation of the [leader]" (p. 568). These items are "The organization holds this leader in high regard," "The organization values this leader's contributions," and "If this leader decided to quit, the organization would try to persuade this leader to stay."

Punitiveness toward transgressing leader. Consistent with previous studies assessing punitiveness (e.g., Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, & Davila, 2005; Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005), participants indicated punitiveness toward the leader by noting how strongly they agreed with statements comprising each dimension of McCullough and Hoyt's (2002) Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM). Sample items are "I wish that something bad would happen to this leader," "I keep as much distance between us as possible," and "I forgive this leader for what s/he did" (reverse-scored) for the revenge, avoidance, and benevolence (forgiveness) dimensions, respectively.

Turnover intention. Participants indicated turnover intentions by noting the extent to which they agreed with statements comprising Mowday et al.'s (1984) five-item scale. Sample items include "I will probably look for a new job in the near future" and "I do not intend to quit my job" (reverse-scored).

Psychological withdrawal. Participants indicated their psychological withdrawal by noting how frequently—within the past 12 months—they had engaged in seven of the eight behaviors identified by Lehman and Simpson's (1992) psychological withdrawal behaviors subscale (1 = *never*, 5 = *very frequently*). Sample items include "left work for unnecessary reasons," "spent

8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
(.78)													
.03	(.81)												
.10	.00	—											
−.01	−.04	.16*	—										
−.08	−.16*	.00	.00	—									
−.09	−.01	−.02	.06	.10	—								
.24**	.03	−.07	−.05	−.06	.03	—							
−.01	.05	−.11	−.09	.03	.08	.08	(.96)						
.04	−.04	−.18*	−.10	.08	.04	.10	.58**	(.93)					
.04	.03	−.13	−.02	−.12	.05	.21**	.55**	.51**	(.88)				
−.05	.16*	−.07	−.10	.03	.04	−.08	.54**	.39**	.36**	(.89)			
−.02	−.09	.08	.10	.26**	.05	−.06	−.38**	−.33**	−.50**	−.26**	(.94)		
−.05	.09	.00	−.05	−.03	.07	−.12	−.07	−.10	−.04	−.07	.21**	(.89)	
.04	.43**	−.04	−.02	−.08	−.04	−.09	.09	−.05	.06	.08	.07	.17*	(.80)

work time on personal matters," and "let others do your work." We removed the item "thought about leaving your current job" because of its similarity to turnover intention.

Control variables. To eliminate the possibility that punitiveness toward transgressing leaders could be explained by variables extraneous to our model, we measured and statistically controlled for other variables that seemed likely to influence punitiveness. Specifically, we measured the recency and perceived severity of the leader's transgression, whether the transgressing leader had apologized (coded 1 and 0 for yes and no, respectively), the leader's management position in the organization (coded 1 for top management/executive committee, 2 for senior-level management, 3 for middle-level management, and 4 for lower level management), leader gender and respondent gender (coded 0 and 1 for males and females, respectively), respondent age, respondent ethnic similarity to leader (coded 0 and 1 for different and similar, respectively), respondents' social desirability (via the shortened version of the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale used by Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972), respondent religiosity (via Cohen, Shariff, & Hill's, 2008, nine-item religiosity scale), respondent negative and positive affectivity (via Watson, Clark, & Tellegen's, 1988, Positive and Negative Affect Schedule), and respondent power distance (via Dorfman & Howell's, 1988, six-item scale). Controlling for these variables, in addition to the surveys' counterbalancing strategies, minimized the effects of common method biases on our results (cf. Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Results

Initial Analyses

Means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and internal consistency reliabilities are presented in Table 2. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with leader's ability, inspirational motivation, LMX, valuation, employees' turnover intentions, and psychological withdrawal as distinct factors and punitiveness (TRIM) as a second-order latent factor, represented by its three subdimensions, demonstrated adequate fit to the data, $\chi^2(1199, N = 162) = 1{,}886.88$, $\chi^2/df = 1.57$, comparative fit index = .90, incremental index of fit = .90, standardized root-mean-square residual = .06, root-mean-square error of approximation = .06, 90% CI [.05, .06]. Chi-square difference tests indicated that this model was a better fit to data than plausible alternative models where LMX and leaders' inspirational motivation were combined ($\Delta\chi^2 = 383.80$, $\Delta df = 6$, $p < .01$), and where LMX, leaders' ability, and inspirational motivation were combined ($\Delta\chi^2 = 787.54$, $\Delta df = 11$, $p < .01$), indicating discriminant validity of those measures. Furthermore, although issues of statistical just-identification prevented us from further establishing the superiority of a model with TRIM (given its multidimensionality) as a second-order latent factor over a first-order model with its three subdimensions as separate factors (e.g., see Byrne, 1994; Edwards, 2001), we relied on prior theorizing (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002) and empirical precedent (e.g., Hoyt et al., 2005; Karremans et al., 2005) in using an aggregated version of that measure in our regression analysis.

Hypothesis Test Results

As can seen in Model 1 of Table 3, employees generally reported higher ratings of LMX for leaders they perceived to be more able ($B = 0.29$, $p < .001$), consistent with Hypothesis 1, and more inspirationally motivating ($B = 0.21$, $p < .01$), consistent with Hypothesis 2; these main effects, along with the control variables, explained a significant portion of variance in LMX ($R^2 = .46$, $p < .001$).

Table 3
Multiple Regression–Related Results Regarding Influences on Employees' Punitiveness Toward a Transgressing Leader

Variable	Model 1 (DV = LMX)	Model 2 (DV = punitiveness [TRIM])	Model 3 (DV = punitiveness [TRIM])	Model 4 (DV = punitiveness [TRIM])	Model 5 (DV = turnover intention)	Model 6 (DV = psychological withdrawal)
Control variables						
Employee's age	-0.05^{*} (.02)	0.02 (.02)	0.01 (.02)	0.01 (.02)	−0.03 (.03)	−0.02 (.01)
Employee's gender	−0.16 (.18)	−0.12 (.20)	−0.17 (.19)	−0.13 (.19)	−0.07 (.32)	−0.03 (.11)
Employee's ethnicity	−0.01 (.03)	0.03 (.04)	0.03 (.04)	0.04 (.04)	−0.00 (.06)	0.03 (.02)
Ethnic similarity with leader	0.03 (.20)	−0.15 (.22)	−0.14 (.21)	−0.15 (.21)	−0.12 (.35)	0.08 (.12)
Employee's positive affectivity	0.35^{*} (.15)	−0.09 (.16)	0.03 (.15)	0.06 (.15)	−0.10 (.26)	−0.15 (.09)
Employee's negative affectivity	0.16 (.13)	−0.03 (.14)	0.03 (.13)	0.08 (.14)	0.26 (.23)	0.00 (.08)
Employee's religiosity	0.05 (.05)	−0.07 (.06)	−0.06 (.05)	−0.05 (.06)	0.11 (.09)	0.07^{*} (.03)
Employee's power distance	−0.05 (.10)	0.05 (.10)	0.03 (.10)	0.04 (.10)	−0.17 (.17)	0.01 (.06)
Employee's social desirability	0.05 (.42)	−0.44 (.45)	−0.43 (.43)	−0.45 (.44)	0.56 (.73)	1.16^{***} (.25)
Leader's gender	−0.12 (.19)	0.04 (.21)	0.00 (.20)	−0.05 (.20)	−0.09 (.33)	−0.13 (.11)
Leader's management level	0.07 (.09)	0.09 (.10)	0.11 (.10)	0.14 (.10)	−0.21 (.16)	−0.01 (.06)
Offense severity	-0.08^{*} (.03)	0.13^{***} (.03)	0.11^{**} (.03)	0.12^{***} (.03)	−0.05 (.06)	0.00 (.02)
Recency of transgression	0.05 (.07)	0.04 (.07)	0.06 (.07)	0.07 (.07)	0.13 (.12)	−0.02 (.04)
Leader apologized	0.11^{*} (.06)	0.01 (.06)	0.05 (.06)	0.04 (.06)	−0.16 (.10)	−0.06 (.03)
Predictor variables						
Leader's ability	0.29^{***} (.06)	-0.20^{**} (.07)	−0.10 (.07)	−0.09 (.07)	−0.00 (.12)	0.06 (.04)
Leader's inspirational motivation	0.21^{**} (.06)	-0.15^{*} (.07)	−0.08 (.07)	−0.09 (.07)	−0.09 (.12)	−0.05 (.04)
LMX			-0.34^{***} (.09)	-0.37^{***} (.09)	0.17 (.15)	0.08 (.05)
Leader's perceived valuation				−0.01 (.07)		
Punitiveness (TRIM)					0.42^{**} (.14)	0.11^{*} (.05)
Interaction						
LMX × Leader's Perceived Valuation				-0.09^{*} (.04)		
R^2	0.46^{***}	0.28^{***}	0.35^{***}	0.37^{*}	0.12^{**}	0.33^{*}
ΔR^2			0.07^{***}	0.02^{*}		

Note. $N = 162$. Unstandardized coefficients are reported, with standard errors in parentheses. DV = dependent variable; LMX = leader–member exchange; TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

To test Hypothesis 3, that LMX mediates the negative relationship that leaders' ability and inspirational motivation each have with leader-directed punitiveness, we followed the stepwise approach laid out by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, as reported above, we found leader ability and inspirational motivation to each be significantly and positively related to LMX. Second, leader's perceived ability and inspirational motivation were each significantly and negatively related to employees' punitiveness toward the leader ($B = -0.20$, $p < .01$, and $B = -0.15$, $p < .05$, respectively; see Table 3, Model 2). Furthermore, LMX was significantly and negatively related to punitiveness after controlling for the two predictor variables ($B = -0.34$, $p < .001$; see Table 3, Model 3). Finally, the lack of significance for the predictor variables in the presence of the mediator and significant effects for the mediator indicate, in support of Hypothesis 3, that LMX is indeed the mediator it is hypothesized to be (see Table 3, Model 3).

Consistent with Hypothesis 4, the LMX × Leader Valuation interaction term was significant ($B = -0.09$, $p < .05$; see Table 3, Model 4). A graph of this interaction (see Figure 2) shows that the negative relationship between LMX and punitive evaluations of the leader was stronger when the leader was more valued in the organization. Moreover, a simple slopes test (Aiken & West, 1991) found that, although LMX was significantly negatively related to punitiveness at all levels of leader valuation, this negative relationship was strengthened (from $B = -0.25$ to $B = -0.50$) at higher levels of leader valuation ($p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

The individual tests of our Hypotheses 1–4, discussed above, indicated support for the mediational role of LMX and the moderating role of leader's perceived valuation. To examine this combination of mediation and moderation in a more integrated manner, we utilized Edwards and Lambert's (2007) moderated-mediation testing procedure. Specifically, we used 1,000 bootstrap samples to locate the upper and lower bounds of the sampling distributions of the indirect effects of the leader's perceived ability and inspirational motivation on leader-directed punitiveness (via LMX) at varying levels of the leader's perceived valuation in the organization (i.e., second-stage moderation; Edwards & Lambert, 2007). This analysis indicated that the negative indirect effect of the leader's perceived ability on leader-directed punitiveness was significantly stronger ($p < .05$) when the leader's valuation was higher (i.e., 1 *SD*; indirect effect = −.20, 95% CI [−.33, −.11]) rather than lower (i.e., −1 *SD*; indirect effect = −.11, 95% CI [−.22, −.02]). Similarly, the negative indirect effect of the leader's inspirational motivation on leader-directed punitiveness was significantly stronger ($p < .05$) when the leader's valuation was higher (i.e., 1 *SD*; indirect effect = −.20, 95% CI [−.34, −.12]) rather than lower (i.e., −1 *SD*; indirect effect = −.10, 95% CI [−.20, −.03]). This integrative analysis thus provided additional support for Hypotheses 1–4.

Finally, to test Hypotheses 5 and 6, we regressed turnover intentions and psychological withdrawal on punitive evaluations of the leader while controlling for all other predictor variables in our model. Results indicated that employees who evaluated the transgressing leader more punitively tended to report greater turnover intention ($B = 0.42$, $p < .01$; see Table 3, Model 5) and stronger psychological withdrawal ($B = 0.11$, $p < .05$; see Table 3, Model 6). Thus, Hypotheses 5 and 6 were each supported.

Discussion

Cumulatively, our findings enable us to make four conclusions. First, when organizational leaders transgress, followers may tend to evaluate them less punitively when these leaders are more strongly perceived to have positive attributes leading followers to rate them with higher levels of LMX. This conclusion extends Hollander's (1958) idiosyncrasy credit theory as it illuminates that the greater latitude typically given when evaluating leaders with more positive attributes occurs even when leaders behave in transgressing, not merely idiosyncratic, ways.

A second conclusion is that leaders' LMX may be key in determining why leaders' positive attributes, such as leaders' ability and inspirational motivation, help them escape punitive evaluation for transgressions. Given that organizations need leaders with positive attributes (e.g., ability, inspirational motivation) to motivate high levels of performance yet also need leaders who trans-

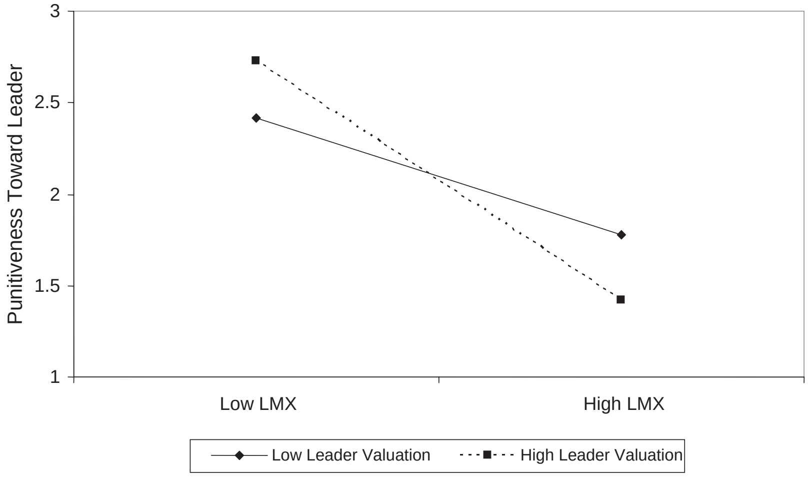

Figure 2. Punitiveness toward transgressing leader as influenced by the interaction of leader–member exchange (LMX) and perceived valuation in the organization.

gress to be disciplined when necessary (Joshi et al., 2007; Lipman-Blumen, 2005), it is a matter of practical as well as theoretical importance for future studies to identify mechanisms that may explain why transgressing leaders with higher levels of LMX, or idiosyncrasy credits, tend to be less punitively evaluated.

A third conclusion is that the negative relationship between the transgressing leaders' LMX (with followers) and punitive evaluations (by such followers) is strengthened when those leaders are also perceived to be highly valued and supported by the larger organization. This finding provides support to the suggestions in the literature that corruption is normalized and unethical climates propagated when top management supports transgressing leaders and fails to discipline or otherwise punish them (D. M. Mayer et al., 2009; Treviño & Ball, 1992; Victor & Cullen, 1988). A practical implication of our finding leaders with higher LMX with followers to be less punitively evaluated for transgressing, especially when the leaders are also more highly valued by their organization, is this: There is need to train employees how to evaluate transgressing leaders for whom there may be varying levels of LMX and varying levels of organizational support. Future research is needed to deepen understanding of the context in which punitive evaluation (e.g., expressions of zero tolerance) will be directed at leaders, especially ones who have performed in ways (e.g., demonstrating ability and/or inspirational motivation) that have enabled them to accumulate idiosyncrasy credits such as high LMX and potentially also high standing in their organization. Importantly, the call for research that we are making here distinguishes us from most LMX studies since we (via our theorizing and findings) are alerting scholars to a potentially negative consequence of higher LMX—namely, tolerance for leader transgression. If future studies replicate our finding that leaders with higher (rather than lower) LMX with followers are less punitively evaluated for transgressions, then they along with our study will help revisit the long-held assumption that higher LMX has (only) positive consequences for organizations such as higher levels of job performance on the part of followers (Bauer, Erdogan, Liden, & Wayne, 2006; Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007; Erdogan & Enders, 2007; Walumbwa, Cropanzano, & Hartnell, 2009).

For maximal variance on perceived valuation as well as other variables included in our hypothesized model, future studies should consist of near-equal numbers of top managers versus lower level employees and should compare reactions to transgressions that are committed by members of one versus the other of these groups. The fact that our study, without the benefit of these two comparison groups, found patterns suggesting the presence of idiosyncrasy credit dynamics (as illustrated in Figure 2) suggests that these dynamics may be robust in organizations. Hopefully, this study will prompt others to test this assumption, including additional boundary conditions of idiosyncrasy credit effects.

A fourth conclusion is that employees' punitiveness toward organizational leaders is associated with higher turnover intentions and psychological withdrawal behaviors. These patterns support management scholars' caution that leaders' ability to keep leading requires them to maintain follower support (e.g., Hollander, 1958; Tyler & Blader, 2000). Since leader transgression may be unintended (such as a loss of temper) or beyond leaders' control (such as being late or absent for reasons, such as health issues, that leaders may wish to keep private), a practical implication of this is the need for trust-repair strategies by leaders. Theory and findings relating to leaders' impression management strategies (cf. Dirks, Lewicki, & Zaheer, 2009; Greenberg, 1990) are helpful but probably not sufficient since past work has excluded variables guided by Hollander's (1958) idiosyncrasy credit theory that have been examined here (which may influence followers' reaction to leaders' trust-repair efforts). Moreover, past impression management studies in work settings have been limited to supervisor–subordinate exchanges. The organizational leaders identified by our study participants included peers and more senior-level managers, all of whom are likely to influence the thinking and/or actions of others, hence potentially be organizational leaders (cf. Yukl, 2002). The fact that the leader–follower exchanges we examined were not limited to vertical dyad linkages, as well as our finding that LMX dynamics still pertained, reinforces the value of examining LMX dynamics in multifaceted leadership situations (cf. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997).

Study Limitations

Our conclusions must be considered with some limitations in mind. First, participants assessed leader qualities with a transgressing leader in mind; the variance they reported on leader qualities is thus probably more restricted than it would have been if participants had assessed the qualities of organizational leaders in general. The fact that our hypothesized model received full support under these conservative circumstances suggests that the idiosyncrasy credit dynamics we observed may be robust. Confidence in our model is increased by (a) our finding (via our CFA results) that participants adequately distinguished between various leadership constructs in our study (e.g., leader ability) and the degree of punitiveness toward the leader, indicating that the employees seemed to cognitively separate these aspects when responding to our survey; (b) our finding no support for a mediational analysis we ran on the reverse causal ordering of our model's variables (i.e., with punitiveness toward the transgressing leader as the trigger of negative evaluations for the leader [such as the leader's ability] that, in turn, would lead to more negative work-related outcomes such as higher turnover intentions and psychological withdrawal behaviors); and (c) our finding measured features of the transgressions such as their severity and recency (as rated by the participant) to be nonsignificantly correlated with antecedent variables such as leader ability, leader inspirational motivation, and leader LMX. Cumulatively, these findings indicate that the nature of leader transgressions might have had limited effects on employees' ratings of leader characteristics.

Second, we limited leader transgression to questionably appropriate action that occurred at work despite the fact that transgressions by organizational leaders can also occur outside of the workplace. Hopefully, our study will prompt future studies to refine and improve the construct of leader transgression as well as broaden the contexts in which leader transgression may (be perceived to) occur and the conditions that make it more versus less tolerable. Doing so would answer Stone and Cooper's (2009) recent call to revive idiosyncrasy credit theory and alert managers to its important practical implications, a view we share given the (un)ethical implications of idiosyncrasy credit dynamics that our study illuminates.

Third, given the distinctive nature of our dependent variables that represented attitudes/behaviors not readily observable by others (e.g., employee punitiveness toward the leader, turnover intentions, and psychological withdrawal), we assessed these with employee self-reports. Although we took numerous procedural and statistical precautions recommended by Podsakoff and colleagues (2003) to mitigate common source artifacts (e.g., temporal separation of surveys, counterbalancing of survey items, controlling for participants' general affectivity, social desirability, and other variables), the single-source nature of our data remains a limitation. Future studies are needed to replicate our results using more objective and observable consequences of employees' punitiveness toward their leaders, such as employees' task performance or actual employee turnover.

In summary, the relationships illuminated by our study promise to help managers as well as management scholars recognize the need to critically evaluate leader transgression no matter how high leaders' idiosyncrasy credit, or LMX, may be. Doing so even incrementally enhances the likelihood that employees (at all levels of the organization) may become aware of leader transgression before it insidiously spreads in ways that can cause organizational demise.

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