

Motives and Emotions behind Destructive Leader Behaviors towards Subordinates: A
Supervisor Sensemaking Perspective

by

Rochelle Evans

A thesis
presented to the University Of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
Psychology

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2017

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Causes of destructive leader behaviors – i.e., intentional leader actions that harm organizations or their members that are normatively perceived as deviant – have been investigated extensively from followers’ perspectives, while leaders’ perspectives – particularly how they engage in sensemaking around destructive incidents – have been neglected. Theory on attributions suggests that leader and follower perspectives on destructive leader behaviors are likely to be different, with leaders (more so than followers) being likely to make external, or situational, attributions for their destructive actions. Thus, this study uses an inductive approach that asks 338 leaders to report on their sensemaking activities regarding destructive incidents, specifically their motivations or explanations for engaging in destructive leader actions, as well as the emotions they experienced afterwards. Reported motives suggests that leaders make a variety of external attributions for their destructive behaviors, which suggests that leader bias in perspective may affect how they rationalize their actions, potentially enabling them to shift blame externally to the situation. As well, at least a third of emotions reported after the incident are neutral or positive, which suggests that a substantial minority of leaders may feel inclined or justified to engage in destructive behaviors toward their followers again.

Keywords: destructive leader behaviors, sensemaking, attributions, motives, emotions, leaders, followers

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank first and foremost my thesis advisors Drs. Winny Shen and Douglas Brown of the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo. Their doors were always open if I encountered any difficulties with my research or writing, and they consistently provided welcome guidance as they thought necessary and whenever I sought it.

I would also like to thank Dr. Lindie Liang for her involvement with the data collection and analysis. Her attention and dedication to this project, and her belief in my abilities to put it all together, helped make this project what it is.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Wendi Adair of the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo as the third reader of this thesis. I am grateful to her for the comments that she made on this thesis to help make it stronger.

Finally, I am profoundly grateful to my parents and sister for their unending love and support, and for encouraging me to pursue my studies, particularly the researching and writing of this thesis. Without them, I would not be where I am today. Thank you.

Author

Rochelle Evans

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Introduction

Destructive leader behaviors include a variety of intentional acts to harm organizations or their members that are normatively perceived as deviant (e.g., such behaviors can be verbal or physical, direct or indirect, and passive or aggressive; Thoroughgood, Tate, Sawyer, & Jacobs, 2012). To date, the victims' perspective of destructive leader behaviors has attracted the most research attention, particularly the negative attitudinal, performance, and health outcomes the targets of these behaviors may experience (e.g., Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006; Duffy, Ganster & Pagon, 2002; Haar, Fluiters & Brougham, 2015; Lin, Wang & Chen, 2013; Tepper, 2000; Zellars, Tepper & Duffy, 2002). In contrast, the perpetrators' perspective regarding their use and beliefs surrounding destructive leadership behaviors has remained largely unexplored. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to shed light on the leader's perspective; in particular, we argue here that an understanding of leaders' sensemaking processes of events may offer an untapped wealth of information for understanding why they engage in destructive leader behaviors.

This study contributes to the literature by investigating the leaders' perspective of their destructive behaviors; specifically, the attributions that leaders make for their destructive leader behaviors may be different from the attributions that followers make. Thus, leader motives may differ significantly from the motives that are prominent in the leadership literature, given that the literature is currently based on the followers' perspective of destructive leadership. In addition, understanding how leaders sensemake their actions may uncover reasons for why leaders engage in continuous destructive actions towards their followers, which the followers' perspective, given that it emphasizes different attributions, has no insight into.

Substantial evidence exists that leaders and followers often have differing perspectives of their shared relationship and interactions (e.g., Gerstner & Day, 1997; Lee & Carpenter, in press). In fact, prior research indicates that convergence between leaders and followers appears

to be particularly low around ethical and negative leadership behaviors; correlations between leaders' and followers' ratings of ethical and laissez-faire leadership behaviors tend to be very small ($\rho = .14$ and $.08$, respectively) and leaders tend to see themselves as engaging in much more ethical leadership behaviors than their followers ($d = .49$; Lee & Carpenter, in press). Given that discrepancies between leader and follower perceptions are likely when it comes to leader behaviors that are negative and have moral implications, by not considering the leader's perspective, we not only miss an important half of the dyadic exchange between leaders and followers, but also ignore, arguably, the most crucial, unrepresented source of information regarding the impetus for destructive leadership behaviors.

Sensemaking is a process by which people “seek plausibly to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events” (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015, p. 266). In the current study, we are interested in understanding how leaders comprehend their own motives for destructive leadership, specifically the attributions (i.e., causal explanations for positively or negatively valenced outcomes; Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas, 2007) they make for their actions. In particular, understanding leader attributions may be helpful for predicting their future behaviors. For example, understanding whether leaders generally make situational, or external, attributions for their actions may also increase understanding as to whether leaders see their actions as situationally warranted. In other words, the extent to which leaders make sense of their actions as enabling them to gain control over difficult situations (i.e., perceiving destructive actions as the only method to deal with uncooperative followers) may increase their tendency to act destructively if they encounter similar situational difficulties in the future. Further, a leader sensemaking perspective may also help clarify the degree to which leader and follower perspectives of destructive leadership likely converge. In particular, leaders may make different

attributions for their actions than followers and emphasize other causes for destructive leader behaviors that should be considered in the literature. For example, research on the actor-observer attribution bias (Martinko et al., 2007) suggests that, while followers may emphasize stable causes for why leaders engage in destructive behaviors (i.e., leader personality), leaders may emphasize situational causes (i.e., poor follower performance).

Part of understanding leader sensemaking around destructive leader behaviors also includes exploring how leaders react emotionally after they engage in these behaviors, as these emotions may be a key cue that leaders use to interpret their own actions. Current research on destructive leadership behaviors has placed little emphasis on the role of the leaders' experience of the incident *after it has taken place*. In other words, we generally have little information about what factors may encourage or reinforce leaders to continue engaging in destructive actions towards followers. To that end, studying leader emotions, in addition to their motivations and explanations, may be informative. Not only has previous theory on motivations and emotions stressed that motivations in themselves partially consist of emotions (Lazarus, 1991a), but prior research has also demonstrated links between specific emotions and specific behavioral tendencies (Frijda, Kuipers & Ter Schure, 1989). Thus, some emotions more so than others may be more instrumental in driving leaders to engage in further destructive actions. In other words, understanding emotional reactions may help us to better understand who or how one becomes a habitually destructive leader.

Without an understanding of how leaders cognitively and emotionally make sense of when they engage in destructive leadership behaviors, we fail to understand how leaders think about such behaviors (e.g., as appropriate or inappropriate) as well as their explanations for why they occurred (e.g., a momentary lapse due to hostile emotions, a justified reaction to

provocation, a legitimate leadership style or approach either for this follower or generally, etc.). As sensemaking is a meaning generating process, it should be noted that leaders' understanding and interpretation of the event could differ substantially from reality (i.e., true underlying causes or explanations). However, we argue that it is nonetheless critical to understand leaders' perceptions and explanations for destructive leadership events, as leader attributions are known to predict how leaders evaluate and interact with followers (Ashkanasy, 2002). For example, previous research has shown that leader attributions tend to significantly affect leaders' disciplinary actions towards followers, with leaders who attribute the performances of failing followers as due to internal causes (versus external causes) also being more likely to punish followers (Offermann, Schroyer, & Green, 1998). Thus, to better capture leader sensemaking around engaging in destructive leader behaviors, we designed and describe here a study that asks leaders about episodes where they engaged in destructive leadership behaviors, particularly their motivations or explanations for doing so and the emotions they subsequently experienced.

Our study thus makes several contributions to the literature. First, it seeks to increase our understanding about the leaders' perspective on how they explain why they engaged in destructive leader behaviors, an aim that has hitherto been neglected by previous studies which have focused primarily on follower perspectives. In particular, by soliciting these leader perspectives, our study captures the sensemaking processes through which leaders interpret, and make attributions for, their destructive actions, thus exploring the potential diversity of explanations behind destructive leader behavior. Such an approach would not only shed light on whether deductive theories that currently inform much of the destructive leadership literature actually figure as prominent motives among leaders (e.g., match between perceived versus actual motives as described by followers and leaders, respectively), but could also encourage theory-

building by expanding the range of explanations for destructive leadership behaviors, which would further advance this literature (Locke, 2007).

Specifically, although there are currently deductive theories in the destructive leadership literature to explain leader motives, this study would clearly outline whether the motives present in the literature actually figure highly among leaders when they engage in sensemaking activities. Conceptually, leader motivations (i.e., “the disposition to attain a goal...activated in any encounter by the demands, constraints, and resources presented by the environment of action”; Lazarus, 1991b, p. 820) is different from leader sensemaking. Leader motivations occur as goal-activated dispositional reactions that dictate the leader’s actions within a particular time-frame specific to the incident, while leader sensemaking is a constructive, meaning-making activity that occurs not only during the incident itself, but also in its aftermath (Maitlis, 2005). Thus, while leader sensemaking and leader motivations have overlapping timeframes, recalled motivations in the wake of an incident differ from the leader’s actual motivations within a particular moment due to significant intervening variables that color, or distort, recollection (e.g., leader attributions).

Leader motivations also differ from leader attributions, which occur when leaders “act as naïve psychologists trying to ascertain the causes of outcomes for both themselves and others” (Martinko, Douglas & Harvey, 2006, p. 128). Leader attributions concern the psychological, meaning-making process that individuals undergo to ascribe causes to a particular situation or to an agent’s actions. While leader attributes can occur within the same timeframe as leader motivations (and can potentially even affect leader motivations for their actions), they are also not time-bounded and can also occur in the wake of particular incidents, such as when leaders engage in sensemaking activities for why they engaged in particular actions. Leader attributions

are narrower in scope than leader sensemaking activities, which can potentially involve other psychological processes (Thiel, Bagdasarov, Harkrider, Johnson, & Mumford, 2012). Thus, by investigating leader sensemaking – with a focus on the attributions they make for acting destructively – our study captures the leaders’ perceptual processes in understanding their own actions, which may not completely overlap with their purported motives, as investigated by deductive theories and studies.

Second, this study also answers the call in the literature to study leader emotions (i.e., Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010), which is important for both understanding leader motivations (Lazarus, 1991a) and providing insight into possible mechanisms that might encourage leaders to continue acting destructively towards their followers even after an incident (i.e., factors that lead to sustained destructive leader behaviors). Third, this study extends the sensemaking literature – criticized as “largely conservative” in its “areas of interest” – into novel research domains, such as leader destructive behaviors and emotions (Brown et al., 2015, p. 272). The study of emotions, in particular, have been a notably “under-developed” area in sensemaking research (Brown et al., 2015, p. 272). Finally, this study also extends more general research and work on attributions in leadership research to the more specific realm of destructive leadership research. In particular, general principles of attributions in leadership research have been utilized in this study to aid our theoretical understanding of how leaders may perceive and explain their destructive leadership behaviors.

Research Aims of the Current Study

This study attempts to understand leaders’ own perspectives – both cognitively and emotionally – on their motives for acting destructively, which could differ substantially from the followers’ perspective. The inductive approach taken in this study – i.e., a qualitative

methodology – asks leaders to provide written accounts of their destructive leader behaviors. Such an approach investigates the retrospective sensemaking perspective that leaders use to understand their own motives. In particular, this study focuses on the role that leader attributions, specifically the actor-observer bias, may play when leaders sensemake their own destructive actions. By focusing on leader attributions for their actions, this study investigates the extent to which leaders’ perspectives of their motives overlap with the motives that deductive theories stress as being important to instigating leaders’ destructive actions. In addition, the current study attempts to alter the pre-dominant assumption in the literature – that leaders have a trait-based pre-disposition for acting destructively – by drawing attention to other important factors that leaders may perceive as more salient than followers (i.e., that leaders are more likely to act destructively given particular motivations or after having experienced particular emotions). Thus, findings from this study may be helpful for understanding how to forecast and prevent destructive leader behaviors, which, due to shortcomings in the current research on destructive leadership literature, deductive theories may not fully address.

Destructive leader behaviors are defined as leader actions that observers interpret as deviant and intentionally harming its targets, which can include either subordinates or the organization, in some way (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). Destructive leader behaviors can have a variety of dimensions, including passive or aggressive, verbal or physical, and direct or indirect (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). On the other hand, abusive supervision (i.e., the follower’s perception of his or her leader’s hostility directed towards him or her over a sustained period of time, excludes physical forms of contact or abuse; Tepper, 2000) is a type of destructive leader behavior; in particular, it concerns a narrower subset of destructive leader behaviors that encapsulates the majority of the destructive leader literature, and has been examined most

frequently. Thus, abusive supervision is within the purview of this study. However, abusive supervision primarily concerns the *followers' sustained* perception of the leader's destructive actions, while this study is concerned with the *leaders' perception* of their own destructive actions. Because this study does not necessarily capture the followers' perspective, or track the occurrence of abusive supervision over time, abusive supervision may not be an accurate or suitable label (see Tepper, 2007 for a similar explanation); thus, for consistency, this study will primarily refer to, and use the label of, destructive leader behaviors.

Although research on destructive leadership has started providing and investigating theories about factors that may cause leaders to act destructively (Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017), its focus on studying antecedents to destructive leader behavior based on the follower perspective does not address the leaders' perspective of their own actions. For example, Zhang and Bednall's (2016) meta-analysis synthesized findings on proposed antecedents of destructive leadership to date and revealed an overall research trend that predominantly focuses on follower-related antecedents (i.e., identifying when followers are more likely to *perceive* destructive leadership). Thus, it can be argued that our research literature to date tells us mostly about antecedents and consequences to followers' *perceptions* of destructive leadership behaviors, which could potentially deviate from the actual occurrence of destructive leadership behaviors.

By only considering the followers' perspective, the literature fails to consider how leaders' understanding of their own actions may enable them to shift blame for their actions to agents outside of themselves. An inductive approach, such as one that is utilized in the current study, would reveal not only the types of factors that leaders feel or perceive are most relevant, or important, for understanding why they acted as they did, but also increase understanding about how leaders frame motivations and explanations for their own destructive actions in their

retrospective sensemaking activities. Thus, current theoretical models relying purely on deductively generated motivations for destructive leadership – while helpful for understanding this phenomena from certain theorized angles – may not address attributions that leaders make for their own actions when they attempt to make sense of these actions, and how these attributions may, in turn, shift the blame for their actions to external determinants outside of themselves.

An example of one such theoretical model was developed and tested by Liu, Liao and Loi (2012) to explain when leaders were more likely to engage in destructive actions, specifically abusive supervision, towards followers. Leaders were more likely to engage in destructive actions as a result of social learning (i.e., their leaders engaged in destructive actions towards them); this effect was strengthened when they attributed their own leaders to having a performance-promotion motive (i.e., acted destructively to improve their performance) and weakened when they attributed their leaders to having an injury-initiation motive (i.e., acted destructively to harm them). Although this specific model seems to test several different kinds antecedents to destructive leader behavior, both directly (i.e., social learning as a cause of destructive leader behavior) and indirectly (i.e., the extent to which perceived performance-promotion and injury-initiation motives served as moderators), such a model would seem to suggest, from the victim's perspective, that only two types of motives (i.e., performance-promotion and injury-initiation) influence leader decisions for engaging in destructive leader behaviors. However, leaders may invoke other explanations or motives to understand or make sense of their destructive leader behaviors for a given episode or situation, highlighting the need to understand how leaders interpret these events and behaviors. Below, the following sections outline theory on leaders cognitively and emotionally sensemake their destructive actions, as

well as how the current study utilizes this theoretical lens to better understand the leaders' perspective behind their destructive actions.

Destructive Leadership from the Leader's Perspective: Sensemaking and Attributions

Better understanding of leader perspectives includes better understanding of leader sensemaking processes that they may engage in to explain why they acted destructively. Leaders who have engaged in destructive leader behaviors may rely heavily on sensemaking – a cognitive process that leaders engage in to understand incidents that have unclear interpretations (i.e., ambiguous, unequivocal or confusing incidents; Brown et al., 2015). Engaging in destructive leader behaviors may qualify as a highly subjective incident, as leaders may see their engagement in these actions as a threat to their sense of self. In particular, self-enhancement theory suggests that people are more likely to indulge in “a host of self-serving biases that presumably enable them to maintain positive conceptions of themselves” (Kwang & Swann, 2010, p. 263). Thus, when leaders encounter negative events (such as their own destructive actions) that run counter to their ability to make positive self-conceptions, they may be more likely to engage in sensemaking and, in particular, make external attributions for their own bad actions to preserve their positive views of themselves (Kwang & Swann, 2010). For example, justice research has demonstrated that leaders are highly motivated to view themselves as fair, such that, even when leaders have not acted fairly towards followers, they may engage in self-enhancement biases to protect their views of themselves as fair people (John & Robins, 1994; Whiteside & Barclay, in press). Thus, sensemaking processes, which enable “active authoring of the situations in which reflexive authors are embedded and are attempting to comprehend” (Brown et al., 2015, p. 267), may be especially relevant for understanding leaders’

rationalizations for their own behavior – particularly their attributions – while emphasizing potential areas of non-convergence between leader and follower perspectives.

In particular, a type of attributional bias that this paper focuses on is the actor-observer bias, which can be generally defined as the tendency for actors and observers to make differing attributions for the actors' actions. Specifically, actors tend to “perceive their behavior as a response to situational cues,” while observers “perceive the behavior as a manifestation of a disposition or quality possessed by the actor” (Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973, p. 154). In other words, observers of an actor are more likely to make internal, stable attributions for the actors' performance, while actors are more likely to make external, situation-based attributions for their actions. Nisbett and colleagues (1973) found early support for this effect: observers tended to assume that actors who act in a particular fashion in one situation are likely to act similarly in similar situations, while the actors themselves did not make these same assumptions. They also found that, when asked to describe themselves and others (i.e., friends), people used more broad, behavioral and dispositional terms to describe their friends than themselves, and were likely to indicate that, relative to their friends, they would be more likely to act in accordance with the specific demands of the situation.

Nisbett et al. (1973) theorized two reasons for this difference in perspective. Firstly, the attentions of the actor and the observer are directed towards different things. Specifically, the actor's attention is fixed on aspects of the situation that he or she is interacting with (i.e., “environmental attractions, repulsions, and constraints”; Nisbett et al., 1973, p. 154), which the actor may perceive as constraining his or her actions accordingly. On the other hand, the observer has limited insight into these situational cues; the observer's attention is instead on the actor's actions, which leads the observer to ascribe the actor's behaviors to his or her internal

traits or characteristics, rather than to the situation. Secondly, the actor and the observer have differential access to information about the actor. For example, the actor may know that he or she is generally unlikely to insult others when provoked; however, those same observers may have no previous knowledge of the actor's interactional history. Thus, if the observer witnesses the actor verbally insult someone else, the observer is more likely to ascribe internal causes to the actor's behavior, such as high trait impulsivity or hostility (Nisbett et al., 1973).

Different aspects of the situation, as well as qualities about the actors and observers themselves, can moderate the effect of the actor-observer bias, such as the actor's performance and gender, or the observers' mood states, belief system, and personality (Ashkanasy, 1997). For example, Ashkanasy (1997) found that the extent to which the observer perceived the actor as similar to themselves moderated the effect of the actor-observer bias: actors that were perceived by the observers as more (versus less) similar to the observers evoked stronger actor-observer biases. Specifically, when actors had poor academic performance, but were deemed by observers as more (versus less) similar to themselves, observers tended to make more external attributions for their failures.

Evidence exists that, within the leader-follower dyad, leaders and followers tend to make different attributions for the followers' actions (Martinko et al., 2007); in particular, these differential attributions align with the actor-observer bias. Specifically, when the follower (i.e., actor) within a leader-follower dyad performs poorly, the leader (i.e., observer) tends to blame the follower, while the follower makes external attributions for their behavior (Martinko et al., 2007). This non-convergence between perspectives suggests that, when making attributions for the leaders' actions, investigating the leaders' perspective may be informative for better understanding the gap that may exist between leaders' and followers' perspectives, particularly

in terms of the attributions that either party makes for destructive leader behaviors. For example, when followers are the observers and leaders are the actors, Liu et al.'s study (mentioned previously) demonstrated that followers (i.e., observers) could discriminate between at least two types of attributions for leaders' (i.e., actors') abusive behaviors (i.e., performance-promotion and injury-initiative motives).

On the other hand, theory suggests that when leaders see themselves as the actors, they will be more likely than followers to make external, or environmental, attributions for their destructive leader actions (Martinko et al., 2007). Thus, leaders' perspectives on their own actions may be characterized by an emphasis on external, situational attributions for engaging in destructive leader behaviors, while follower perspectives may be characterized by an emphasis on internal, stable attributions for the leaders' actions. The current study focuses on explicating the leader's perspective behind their destructive actions, which may serve to identify and highlight which motives they feel are relevant, but have not previously been identified or emphasized by the followers' perspective. Thus, considering the leaders' perspective may contribute to understanding when leaders are likely to engage in destructive leader behaviors. Specifically, we may be able to better gauge not only how leaders themselves see their actions, but also how they might rationalize these actions during sensemaking that might emphasize or de-emphasize their level of responsibility for engaging in these actions.

Leader's Perspective and Leader Emotions

A comprehensive understanding of the leaders' perspective of an incident in which they acted destructively towards a follower – with particular focus not only on their motives for acting destructively, but also on their *emotional* reactions to their actions – may provide some guidance for how leaders may interpret subsequent interactions with their follower. To that end, the

current study attempts to fill this significant gap in understanding by directly asking leaders for not only their motives behind acting destructively, but also the emotions that they experience after engaging in such actions. In particular, this study investigates the possible diversity of emotional reactions that leaders might have in response to their actions, and considers whether the emotional reactions they experience may make them more inclined to act destructively again.

Previous theories have stressed the extent to which emotional and motivational processes are interwoven with each other, both biologically and socially, such that seeking to better understand one also involves seeking better understanding of the other (Lazarus, 1991b; Lazarus, 1991a; Buck, 1985). Indeed, Lazarus (1991a) stresses not only that motivation is itself made up of “acute emotions and moods” (p. 820) that help us to gauge the personal relevance of our situations to our goals, but also that our emotional experiences during and after these situational encounters can, in turn, inform our subsequent motivations. Thus, theoretically, studying leader emotions in tandem with leader motivations may enhance understanding of what drives leaders’ actions more so than simply studying their motivations alone.

Specifically, leaders’ emotions are also part of the sensemaking process, in that emotions help them to gauge both the suitability and repeatability of their destructive actions. In general, theory and research suggests that people use emotions as a guide or as information about their reactive state to some event or object that they are making some judgement about (i.e., affect-as-information hypothesis; Clore & Huntsinger, 2007). Specifically, studies have shown that people consciously process emotions faster than cold, or cognitively-reasoned, judgements about a situation or stimulus, and that people’s emotions predict the valence of their thoughts and motivations better than cognitively-reasoned judgements (Pham, Cohen, Pracejus & Hughes,

2001), thus stressing links between people's emotions and their subsequent appraisals of situations.

In addition, emotions also represent particular response tendencies (Gross, 1998). Response tendencies are flexible sequential behaviors that arise following an individual's evaluation of a situation as either challenging or presenting some kind of opportunity (Gross, 1998). Indeed, previous research has found links between specific emotions and behaviors (Frijda et al., 1989; Buck 1985). In particular, these emotions are linked with specific types of appraisals of a situation, which guide future behaviors (Frijda et al., 1989). For example, a leader who experiences guilt after acting destructively should be more likely to seek to repair the relationship with the follower and may be less inclined to repeat this behavior in the future. In contrast, a leader who experiences shame after engaging in destructive leadership behaviors may be more likely to withdraw from future interactions with the follower, resulting in a negative self-evaluation that may predispose the leader to act destructively in the future. Theory would also suggest that leaders who feel empowering emotions, such as anger, might perceive their behavior as justified and have an even stronger inclination to engage in the behavior again to right a wrong that they perceive the follower has done to them (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). Thus, action tendencies, or behaviors, can be predicted from the emotional state of the individual and vice versa (Frijda et al., 1989). As such, our study asks leaders to report on their emotional experience after acting destructively, which may give us a rough sense of whether leaders engaging in destructive leader behaviors are likely – or unlikely – to continue engaging in such behaviors.

Current Research on Antecedents of Destructive Leadership

The current literature may emphasize attributions that leaders themselves are less likely to consider as important. This emphasis might not only lead to an over-reliance on stable traits or tendencies (i.e., high levels of hostile attribution bias or harming followers for the sake of causing injury) as explaining leader actions, but may also ironically enforce the notion that leaders are unable to control themselves from acting destructively because of their traits – which is a counterintuitive stance for designing effective interventions to prevent destructive leader behaviors. In addition, although earlier studies have focused on emotional drivers of the leaders’ destructive actions (e.g., hostility and frustration), little or no work has comprehensively theorized or studied leaders’ experiences or reflections of the incident *after it has taken place*. In particular, the literature is mostly silent on the specific factors that may sustain a destructive dynamic in the leader-follower relationship (for an exception, see Hu & Liu, 2017 for a possible theoretical explanation). Research in the destructive leadership field usually focuses more research attention on leader traits and circumstances that leaders cannot always control (e.g., psychological contract violation and hostile attribution bias, Hoobler & Brass, 2006; interactional justice and authoritarian leadership style, Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007). This trend, in turn, suggests a dominant narrative in the destructive leadership literature, where leaders who have committed destructive leader behaviors are viewed as inherently flawed. Part of what drives this narrative may be the traditional research focus on the follower perspective of destructive leader behavior, particularly the consequences they suffer. However, followers who are, or perceive themselves to be, the target of destructive leader behaviors may also have heightened self-protective biases that inaccurately motivate them to lay the entire blame on their leaders for their experiences of destructive leader behaviors.

Self-protective biases arise when the perceived worth and integrity of a person's identity is under threat – thus, information that undermines self-worth, such as the cause of destructive leader actions directed towards the followers, may be distorted by victimized followers to protect their self-worth (Sherman & Cohen, 2002). As a result, we may not have a complete picture of what causes leaders to act destructively unless we also ask the leaders themselves. Although a research focus on leader traits is still important, this focus may have come at the expense of understanding the types of attributions that leaders make for their actions, which may differ substantially from the types of attributions that followers make for leaders' actions. This gap in perspective may lead to an over-emphasis in the literature on follower attributions for leaders' actions, even when understanding how leaders' themselves perceive their actions may be equally important. Therefore, in attempting to address this gap in perspective between leader and follower attributions for leader actions, research focus should be directed towards better understanding of the leaders' perspectives of their actions.

The Current Study

Our study makes several contributions to the literature to remedy some of the current pitfalls in the destructive leadership literature: without knowing how leaders perceive and understand their own destructive actions, current theoretical models about the antecedents of leaders' destructive behaviors may not accurately reflect, or address, the specific motives that leaders perceive as causing them to act destructively. Specifically, differences between leaders and followers in the attributions either party makes for the other party's actions suggests that both parties are likely to focus on different motives to explain the same destructive behavior (Liu et al., 2012; Martinko et al., 2007). Thus, focusing solely on followers' perspectives on perceived motives for why destructive leader behaviors occurs without considering leaders' perspectives

could result in theoretical imprecision, in turn jeopardizing downstream intervention efforts at mitigating the effects of destructive leader behaviors on its victims.

First, we seek to increase understanding about the leaders' own perspectives on why they act destructively, an aim which has hitherto been neglected by previous studies. In particular, our study takes a unique, inductive approach to understanding destructive leadership that considers the potential diversity of explanations that leaders could give for their destructive leader behaviors. Such an approach would not only investigate whether deductive theories that currently inform much of the destructive leader literature actually figure as prominent motives among leaders for understanding their own behaviors, which would be helpful for designing interventions around preventing these behaviors. Current research emphasis on more distal factors for destructive leader behaviors, such as leader characteristics, tend to also emphasize little remedial action for preventing destructive leader behaviors from occurring (besides not selecting these individuals). Thus, our hope is that the current study will help alter the dominant research narrative (i.e., that leaders are pre-disposed to act destructively, because of their traits) and stimulate more research on preventable factors that can cause destructive leader behaviors (i.e., that leaders are more likely to act destructively given particular motivations and suggest possible avenues regarding how to help leaders think differently about their own actions).

In addition, recognizing that individuals choose to act destructively sometimes may be informative for designing interventions to reduce or eliminate destructive leader behaviors. In particular, interventions that target errors that leaders possibly make when sensemaking about their destructive actions – for example, targeting leaders' external attributions for their actions towards followers and finding ways to encourage leaders to de-emphasize these external

attributions – may be more effective for preventing leaders from engaging in destructive leader behaviors than interventions that target more distal, or stable, traits (i.e., personality).

Second, this study both attempts to better understand leader emotions – an area of leadership research which Gooty and colleagues (2010) have stressed needs more research attention – and address the research gap around understanding leaders’ emotional experience of their own destructive behaviors. Our qualitative study investigates leader emotions in tandem with leader explanations for acting destructively, which may lead to more fruitful conclusions about leaders’ sensemaking by exploring both cognitive attributions and emotional reactions that leaders may rely on to understand their actions. In particular, understanding leader emotions after they have engaged in destructive behaviors may give some indication of whether leaders could be inclined to engage in the behavior again and the likely future pattern of interactions between leaders and followers.

Method

The purpose of this study is to ask leaders about their motives, in retrospect, for engaging in destructive actions towards their subordinates – as well as the emotions that leaders experience after. Thus, a qualitative method of investigation is the most appropriate design for this study, as quantitative approaches (e.g., fixed responses on surveys, etc.) would limit the spontaneity and dynamism of participant responses. In particular, Lee, Mitchell & Sablinski (1999) describe several characteristics of qualitative data that best benefit the current study's purpose. Firstly, gathering qualitative data should be free from the laboratory context. Given the nature of the particular sample (i.e., organizational leaders) and its purpose, this particular characteristic is well-suited for the collection of quality data without relying on experimental manipulation of variables. Secondly, qualitative data “derive from the participants' perspective” (p. 163), which suggests that, in general, the researcher elicits the participants' perspective without the explicit aim of imposing any particular interpretation on the data (with few exceptions, which shall be reviewed subsequently). Thirdly, qualitative research can be flexible and responsive to the needs of a particular research situation, which is important for conducting research on a relatively new topic (i.e., leader sensemaking of destructive leader behaviors). Finally, qualitative methodology does not follow typical standards of quantitative methodology (i.e., “control, reliability and validity;” p. 163), which may be especially beneficial, given the novelty of studying leader sensemaking behind their destructive actions.

In particular, this study uses content analysis, “a widely used qualitative research technique” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277), to analyze leader responses about their motivations and emotions. Specifically, there are three types of content analysis approaches that

researchers can use (i.e., conventional, directed and summative; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The conventional approach is the derivation of content coding from the data itself and can be simply referred to as “inductive category development” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). In other words, researchers tend to use this approach when there is limited theory on a particular phenomenon of interest, and they aim to generate new theory and hypotheses to test concerning this phenomenon. For the current study, the conventional approach is generally used to analyze leader emotions after engaging in destructive behaviors, as there is little theory on the kinds of emotions that leaders experience after they engage in such behaviors (with one exception, as clarified below in the subsequent paragraph). Another approach, or the summative approach, is a form of latent content analysis, which primarily focuses on coding that directs understanding towards the “underlying meanings of the words or content” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1284). The current study does not use this particular approach.

Finally, the last approach, or the directed approach, is also relevant to the goals of this study. This type of content analysis approach works to “validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” and can be referred to as a “deductive category development” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). In other words, researchers use this approach when there is already existing theory that may require more descriptive study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The current study suggests, similarly, that, although there is existing theory on leader motives, these motives may need to be assessed for relative importance to leaders using their sensemaking perspective, as opposed to simply using the deductive approach to study leader motives. Specifically, the current study argues that leader motives in the literature for engaging in destructive behavior are primarily based on the followers’ perspective and should be re-assessed for their importance, or salience, to the leaders themselves, as the attributions that leaders make

for their behaviors, in their sensemaking activities, may differ from follower attributions. Thus, given that the directed approach is guided by the theoretical structure that is already in place (i.e., current literature on destructive leader behaviors), this approach is ideally suited to studying the types of motivations that are salient to leaders who act destructively. When using this approach, researchers, as they analyze the data, make notes and identify “key concepts or variables as initial coding categories” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1281); once these categories are established, researchers go back to the literature and define these categories according to theory. Given the points highlighted above, the current study uses this form of content analysis to analyze leader motivations made following destructive leader actions. It also uses this form of content analysis to analyze certain types of leader emotions, particularly positive and negative emotions, which draw upon distinctions within pre-existing theory (i.e., Barrett and Russell’s (1998) structure of affect).

Participants

Leaders were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Prior research supports that M-Turk samples can be a source of high quality data for research (e.g., Behrend, Sharek, Meade, & Wiebe, 2011; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). First, interested individuals who resided in Canada or the United States had the opportunity to complete a pre-screen questionnaire online, which collected their demographic information, including whether or not they currently held a leadership role. Next, to ensure that potential participants who met these criteria understood the construct of destructive leadership, they were told that “[leaders] engage in a wide variety of behaviors when interacting with followers,” were provided with a definition of a follower (i.e., “an individual who directly reports to you”), and were shown a list of fifteen behaviors from the abusive supervision scale (Tepper, 2000). This scale was used, firstly,

because it has a high reliability (e.g., 0.91; Lian, Brown, Ferris, Liang, Keeping, & Morrison, 2014). The majority of research on destructive leadership also uses the abusive supervision scale (Tepper et al., 2017); in addition, this scale overlaps with the construct of destructive leader behaviors, particularly the types of leader behaviors directed towards followers, which is the primary concern of this study. Participants were asked to indicate whether they had engaged in any of these behaviors towards a follower; those who did not were screened out, and those who did were invited to participate in this study, for which they received \$0.75 in compensation.

Out of the 1130 participants who completed this pre-screen questionnaire, 349 participants met the study criteria (i.e., they were full-time employees who held leadership roles in their organization and had previously acted destructively towards a follower). After removing participants with unusable data ($n = 11$), as they had either not completed the survey or indicated that they did not want their data to be used, the final sample consisted of 338 participants. Of these 338 participants, 50.6% were first-line leaders, 40.5% were middle-level managers, and 8.9% were top-level managers. Their average age was 33.0 years old, the majority were White (76.0%), and the most frequent category of educational attainment was college graduate (49.7%). On average, participants had been working in their organization for 64.0 months, and working in their position for 38.4 months.

Procedure

I used the critical incident technique to elicit qualitative responses from supervisors, a method which has typically been used in management research to elicit qualitative responses on subordinate performance and workplace injustice (e.g., Liang, Lian, Brown, Ferris, Hanig, & Keeping, 2016; Bobocel, 2013). Moreover, traditional qualitative work has also used this approach to study managerial viewpoints and perceptions of the success of implemented

employee interventions (Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002). The current study asks participants to recall and visualize an incident in which they had acted destructively towards a follower (e.g., Flanagan, 1954). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (i.e., “most memorable” and “most recent” incident of destructive leadership). In the “most memorable” condition, participants were asked to “think about these incidents, and recall and visualize one of the most memorable incidents that you have engaged in towards one of your followers”; they were then told to “write down the follower’s initials” in the questionnaire and to “put as much effort as you can into this task” for one minute, after which the online survey allowed them to move to the next page. Participants in the “most recent” condition received similar instructions except they were asked to “recall and visualize one of the most recent incidents” in which they had engaged in a destructive leader behavior towards a follower.

These two conditions were administered to examine whether leader sensemaking around destructive leader actions varied by the type of incident. Specifically, instructions to recall the “most memorable” incident (i.e., participants may reflect on atypical, or non-representational, incidents of destructive leader behaviors) versus the “most recent” incident (i.e., participants who are encouraged to simply think back to the latest incident, may be more likely to recall typical, or representational, incidents of destructive leader behaviors) may lead to qualitatively different types of recalled incidents in the two conditions that then lead to different sensemaking processes. Past research on attributions and salience of information suggests that the “salience of an element affects its availability in memory, which in turn mediates attributions made concerning that element” (Pryor & Kriss, 1977, p. 53). That is, leaders may make different attributions for their destructive behaviors in the “most memorable” incidents compared to the “most recent” incidents; for example, leaders may be more likely to make external attributions in

the “most memorable” than in the “most recent” condition if they tend to recall more serious or egregious destructive acts in the former compared to the latter condition. For leader emotions, if leaders tend to recall more severe or egregious destructive acts in the “most memorable” than “most recent” conditions, they may also accordingly experience stronger emotional reactions after these incidents. In particular, Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence (2013) proposed that stronger, and particular negative emotions are more (versus less) likely to trigger people to engage in sensemaking activities. Thus, for leaders who report “most memorable” (versus “most recent”) incidents may not only report experiencing stronger emotional reactions to these incidents, but may also engage in more sensemaking activities, thus leading them to potentially make more (versus less) external attributions.

Open-ended questions were also designed to elicit responses that were thought to speak directly to the experience of engaging in destructive leadership behaviors (Grant, Berg, & Cable, 2014). Participants wrote responses to open-ended study questions, of which this study’s particular analytic focus was directed towards a) their explanations for their destructive leader actions, and b) how they felt about those actions afterwards. Specifically, the study questions included the following: 1) “[P]lease elaborate on what happened in the incident? What did you do?”; 2) “What motivated you to engage in these behaviors towards your follower [follower initials as entered by the participant]?”; 3) “How did you feel about this incident afterwards?”; 4) “What, if any, actions did you take after this incident?”; 5) “Did your follower [follower initials] do anything after this incident?” On average, leaders had been supervising their visualized follower for 23.8 months. For the “most memorable” condition, leaders, on average, described an incident that occurred within the past 9.1 months. For the “most recent” condition, leaders, on

average, described an incident that occurred within the past 6.0 months. (Across both conditions, leaders described incidents that ranged in their occurrence from 0 to 60 months ago).

Coding

The researcher used an approximation of the two-step coding procedure used by Fitness (2000). In the first stage, as Fitness (2000) had done, the researcher took notes about leaders' emotions and motives behind engaging in destructive behavior. Based on these notes, the researcher created two sets of coding categories based on these notes: one for emotions and another for motives. For motives, categories emerged in the data, and participants' responses were coded accordingly. For motives or explanations, the categories included: *Hostile Emotions*, *Follower Behavior*, *Top-Down Performance Pressure*, *Career Advancement*, *Performance-promotion Motive*, *Displaced Aggression*, *Conflict*, and *Miscellaneous Motives*. However, these categories also reflect various existing theoretical perspectives in the destructive leadership literature (i.e., the "trickle-down" perspective, the victimization framework, instrumental aggression, impulsivity, and conflict). Please see table 3 for a breakdown of how these categorical motives are organized according to the theoretical perspectives. For coding emotional reactions to destructive leadership, categories emerged in the data, and all of the participants' responses were coded accordingly. For emotions, the categories included: *Self-Conscious Emotions*, *Hostility*, *Other Negative Emotions*, *Neutral Feelings*, *Positive Feelings*, and *Miscellaneous Feelings*. Each response could be classified into several different categories and often received multiple codes. In this way, the coding scheme is designed to ensure that the complexity of responses is fully represented. In the second stage of coding, an independent observer reviewed both coding schemes to verify the independence and clarity of the codes, as well as how well the codes were applied to the data.

Results

Leader Motives for Destructive Leader Behaviors

Table 3 and 4 contains a breakdown of leader motives or explanations (and their percentages) for destructive leadership, both overall and by condition, as well as whether the two conditions (i.e., “most memorable” vs. “most recent”) were significantly different from each other. As mentioned before, the categories in the coding scheme for leader motives were at first self-generated; however, because of the similarities between these self-generated categories and various theoretical perspectives, these categories were conceptually organized according to these theoretical perspectives. Below, an explanation of how these categories align with each of the various theoretical explanations in the destructive leadership literature (i.e., victimization framework, the “trickle-down” perspective, instrumental aggression, impulsivity, and conflict) will be provided. The following sections will be organized according to these theoretical perspectives and provide more details about the results.

First, the following categories, *Follower Behavior*, *Top-Down Performance Pressure*, and *Career Advancement*, are common explanations proposed in the destructive leadership literature for why leaders act destructively, and could be conceptually based on the victimization framework. According to Aquino and Thau (2009), the victimization framework posits that leaders are often motivated by external sources to act destructively towards their followers, including follower characteristics (e.g., incompetence), situational pressures (e.g., management pressures), or self-preservation (e.g., protecting one’s job). Second, the *Displaced Aggression* theme was conceptually similar to the “Trickle-Down” perspective, which proposes that leaders will act destructively towards their followers following a stressful experience, either from other sources (e.g., spouse) or because their own leaders have acted destructively towards them

(Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012). Third, the *Hostile Emotions* theme matches with Impulsivity (Tepper, Duffy, & Breaux-Soignet, 2012), which suggests that leaders act destructively because their actions are automatic and uncontrolled. Fourth, the *Performance-promotion* theme shares conceptual similarities with instrumental aggression (Tepper et al., 2012), which is when leaders perform deliberate expressions of hostility with specific objectives in mind. Finally, the *Conflict* theme matches with conflict, which generally concerns interpersonal disputes or incompatibilities in the workplace (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003); more specifically, the form of *Conflict* investigated in this study took the form of interpersonal conflict, or “relationship tensions among group members” (Liu, Chen, Chen, & Sheu, 2010, p. 3). Compared to the first two theoretical perspectives, the last three (i.e., impulsivity, instrumental aggression and conflict) are generally under-utilized explanations for why destructive leader behaviors occur in the literature.

Victimization framework. The most frequently reported motive or explanation, both within the Victimization framework and for all sampled destructive leader behaviors, was *Follower behavior* (38.4% overall), for both “most memorable” (39.5%) and “most recent” (37.2%) conditions. In particular, leaders who reported this motive either judged the follower incompetent (e.g., poor work performance); found followers’ behaviors (e.g., tardiness) or deviance (e.g., rudeness) offensive; or found followers’ salient defective characteristics (e.g., cockiness) annoying. For example, one front-line leader in a restaurant setting described his follower (a waiter) as not only “trying” and annoying to his co-workers, but also, in the incident described, garnering complaints from customers within the first 20 minutes of the leader’s shift. When the follower spills “a big sauce pan of dressing” on the leader through lack of attention, the leader “just lost it at that point” and “cursed and ridiculed [sic] him while yelling” [37].

The fourth overall most reported motive, *Top-down Pressure* (9.3%), was also within the victimization framework. This motive is different from trickle-down perspective, in that these leaders are not necessarily the target of destructive leader behaviors from other sources and are redirecting this destructive behavior; instead, these leaders perceive demands that other sources (e.g., their leaders), or their situation, are making of them and feel that it is necessary to act destructively to meet these demands. As such, this motive was reported by leaders when higher-ups told the leader to engage in destructive actions; when leaders felt that the company reputation, other followers, and client satisfaction were under immediate threat by a follower's actions; when leaders felt that upper management could possibly punish them for followers' transgressions; and when leaders wanted to maintain their image in front of upper management. An example is when one leader [190], who oversaw a poorly performing department store that did not make its sales quotas in a single weekend, had to "use the wording from [their] manager" and "write up" their best employee as "useless." This leader reported that, because "the slave drivers above [them] give [them] very ridiculous requirements and prefer [them] to keep a large paper trail instead of actually addressing issues," one of their motivations for engaging in destructive leader actions had been "job security" [190] – to avoid punishment for follower transgressions.

The last motive within the victimization perspective is the *Career Advancement* (5.3%) motive and was the least reported motive out of all destructive leader motives or explanations. Leaders reported this motive when they felt that the follower was impinging on their ability to do their job properly; when they felt that his/her position was threatened by the follower; or when they felt they should show his or her authority. For example, one follower required the leader to repeat "the exact same step by step information in how to deal with escalated customers" at least

several times each week. As a result, this leader wrote this follower up for a “misconduct” to prevent the follower from “wast[ing]” any more “of [their] time” [96].

“Trickle-Down” Theoretical Perspective. In contrast with the victimization framework, the “trickle-down” theoretical perspective was not a frequently invoked explanation by leaders for destructive behaviors, as *Displaced Aggression* (7.5% overall) was only the fifth most reported category. Leaders reported this motive when they cited external stressors, such as time constraints, as leading to his/her destructive behavior; or when they reported his or her negative experiences with a leader, co-worker, or spouse as leading to their destructive actions. One leader “was reprimanded by [his] boss for missing an assignment,” which he had not known about because of a “communication error.” As a result, when urging his team to complete the missing assignment, he “got angry, [he] spoke unpleasantly and was not kind in coercing them to get the job done” [95]. Because relatively few incidents report this category as a motive for destructive leadership, these results suggest that the “Trickle-down” perspective, in which the leader redirects destructive behavior received from alternate sources, may not be commonly used by leaders to explain why they engaged in destructive behaviors.

Impulsivity. The second most frequently reported explanation amongst all destructive leader behavior motives was *Hostile Emotions* (15.2%), for both “most memorable” (14.7%) and “most recent” (15.8%) conditions. This motive was characterized by anger, frustration, and other empowering negative emotions, such as irritation. For example, one leader reported feeling “frustration” with a follower who “[left a] broom right in the aisle where [they] frequently walked”, resulting in the leader continually tripping over it. As a result, the leader “ridiculed” the follower, “instead of making a suggestion” [208].

Instrumental Aggression. The sixth category of leader explanations was *Performance-promotion motive* (overall = 6.1%). Leaders reported this motive when they wished to deter other followers from committing particular actions by making an example of one follower; when they wanted to stress to followers that their actions are unacceptable; and when the leader wished to improve follower performance in some way. For example, one leader reported that their follower was “incompetent at certain...job tasks.” Motivated to “improve his performance,” this leader prepared a “written formal document to outline the incompetence,” had “[the follower] read over the document,” and threatened the follower with being “[removed] from [his] position if he did not improve his performance” [105].

Conflict. *Conflict* (6.1%) was the seventh largest leader motive category. Leaders reported this motive when they felt that their followers’ behavior was causing conflict between the followers and themselves, or when they felt that the follower’s behavior was causing general conflict in the workplace. For example, one leader overseeing kitchen staff at a retirement home had one follower who “would always belittle and complain that [other kitchen staff] did not do their job right” and would point out these flaws in front of others. As a result, the leader, who “was motivated by how she treated others and how it made them feel,” called her out “in front of the others, point[ing] out...all of her mistakes, and basically just embarrassed her” [53].

Testing for differences between “most memorable” and “most recent” conditions. As indicated earlier, leaders may make different attributions for their destructive behaviors in the “most memorable” incidents compared to the “most recent” incidents (i.e., more serious or egregious destructive acts recalled in the former, versus latter, condition may increase the likelihood for external attributions in the “most memorable” than in the “most recent” condition). Thus, we tested whether the frequency of motives or explanations invoked by leaders per

category was significantly different between the two conditions. In particular, we conducted independent samples *t*-tests to compare them on general and specific categories of motives.

Across general categories, the only difference was that more *Conflict* motives were reported in the “most memorable” ($M = 0.13$, $SD = 0.34$) than the “most recent” ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.23$) condition, $t(295.880) = 2.435$, $p < .05$. Across sub-categories, there were no differences in the types of motives reported across conditions (all $ps = ns$). In general, the lack of difference in terms of motive or attribution distributions across these two conditions suggests that motives or explanations tend to be similar when the study instructions stress vivid or recent recollections of destructive leader incidents. In particular, these findings suggest that leaders are not more likely to make external attributions in one condition as opposed to another. These findings thus indicate similarity in leader recollection of motives or sensemaking processes, regardless of how long ago the incident occurred or how severe, as well as a stable tendency for leaders to consistently make external attributions (i.e., the actor-observer bias) when sensemaking the cause of their destructive leader actions.

Leader Emotions Following Destructive Leadership

Tables 5 and 6 contain emotion categories that leaders reported experiencing after engaging in destructive leadership behaviors, the overall number of emotions and percentages for each category, and a further breakdown of emotions and percentages by condition. The Emotions Coding Scheme consisted of self-generated categories, but also utilized some existing theoretical perspectives to provide sub-categories within two categories: *Other Negative Emotions* and *Positive Emotions*. In particular, the researcher used Barrett and Russell’s (1998) structure of affect to structure these categories. This structure of affect has two dimensions, arousal and valence, each of which consists of two poles. Arousal consists of activation – or states of higher

energy – and de-activation – states of lower energy – while valence consists of pleasant versus unpleasant states. As a result, *Other Negative Emotions* had two categories (i.e., unpleasant/activation and unpleasant/de-activation), while *Positive Feelings* had three categories (pleasant/activation; pleasant/de-activation; and feelings of justification, which did not fit in the previous two categories). The results of each of the self-generated categories are presented in order of how frequently these categories were reported (i.e., *Other Negative Emotions*, *Self-Conscious Emotions*, *Positive Feelings*, *Neutral Feelings*, *Hostility*, and *Miscellaneous Feelings*).

Other Negative Emotions. The majority of leaders reported feelings consistent with the *Other Negative Emotions* category (30.8% overall) after engaging in destructive leader behaviors. Most of these leaders reported feelings under the *Unpleasant/Activation* (26.9%) subcategory (e.g., tense, nervous, stressed, upset, or even just “bad”). One leader indicated that they “ridiculed [their] subordinate in front of the [entire] team” and felt “terrible” about it afterwards [119]. Comparatively few leaders reported feelings from the *Unpleasant/De-activation* (2.3%) subcategory (e.g., sad, depressed, lethargic or fatigue). One leader reprimanded a follower, who “was not being careful in the lab” and “spilled some chemical on his hand,” and reported feeling “disappointed” with the follower after the incident [170].

Self-Conscious Emotions. Many leaders reported experiencing self-conscious emotions (*Self-Conscious Emotions*; 25.8%), in particular guilt (i.e., awareness that their actions are below their own standards; 9.7%), but also embarrassment (i.e., uncomfortable self-consciousness about having lost face in front of followers; 2.7%), shame (i.e., sense of deep-rooted discomfort over, and awareness of, discrepancy between their ideal and actual selves; 1.8%), self-blame (i.e., “feeling responsible” for what happened; 4.3%), regret (i.e., wishing the incident had not happened; 5.7%), and repentance (i.e., “feeling sorry” towards the follower; 3.3%) after the

incident. One leader reported feeling “guilt” after telling a follower, whose cat “has been dead for five years” and was still mourning its passing, to “man up and stop being a pansy” [192].

Positive Feelings. Surprisingly, many leaders reported feeling positive emotions after engaging in destructive leadership behaviors (*Positive Feelings*; 19.4%). A few leaders reported feelings from the *Pleasant/Activation* category (e.g., alert, excited, elated, happy, or even being “great”). After “[filing] some customer orders under the wrong account and...[costing the company] a couple hundred dollars to fix the mistake,” one leader reported feeling “great” after “pinning [their mistake] on the shift leader” [281]. Similarly, few leaders reported feelings from the *Pleasant/De-activation* (4.9%) category (e.g., contented, serene, relaxed, calm, “good,” or “relieved”). One leader reported making “many negative comments about [a follower] to a peer” as a result of their frustration with that follower, and then feeling a sense of “relief” and a “therapeutic” effect [452].

Many leaders reported feeling justified or vindicated in their actions (*Justified/Vindicated*; 12.7%). In response to one follower who “wanted to leave early to deal with some...stress from a loved one at home,” a leader “lied to him about the volume of outgoing shipments to get him to focus on work,” even though this leader was “pretty sure [the follower] knew [they were] lying the whole time.” The leader reported feeling justified in their actions, indicating that they “would do it again” if they could [283].

Neutral Feelings. A number of leaders also reported feeling neutral, fine or nothing after the destructive leader behavior took place (*Neutral Feelings*; 9.8%). One leader dealt with an “upset” follower who was “not being allowed to work on a special project” by going “into great detail [about] the recent errors and mistakes [the follower] had been making to illustrate why he was not picked for the project”; this leader reported feeling “fine” after this incident [112].

Hostility. Compared to the number of leaders reporting positive or neutral emotions, not as many leaders reported feeling angry or frustrated (*Hostility* emotion; 7.9%). A leader who “ridiculed one of [their followers] for not doing the job right” reported feeling angry at the follower afterwards.

Miscellaneous. Few leaders reported feeling anything that did not fall within the previous categories. *Miscellaneous* category of emotions included emotions that did not belong to the other categories – *Others* (4.5%) – and *Ambivalent* (both good and bad) emotions (1.4%).

Testing for differences between “most memorable” and “most recent” conditions. Leaders may use their emotions following destructive leader behaviors to sensemake their behaviors differently for “most memorable” (versus “most recent”) incidents. With regard to motives, we proposed that more serious or egregious destructive acts recalled in the former, versus latter, condition may increase the likelihood for leaders to make external attributions in the former, versus latter, condition. Thus, for more serious types of destructive acts, leaders may also experience heightened emotional cues, particularly negative ones, that cause them to engage in more sense-making activities, and thus, result in a higher frequency of external attributions reported (Maitlis et al., 2013).

To test whether our two conditions significantly differed on the number of emotions reported per category, we conducted independent samples *t*-tests to compare them on general and specific categories of emotions. Across general categories, the only difference was that more *Neutral Feelings* were reported in the “most recent” ($M = 0.18, SD = 0.38$) than “most memorable” ($M = 0.09, SD = 0.28$) condition, $t(307.746) = -2.455, p < .05$. Across sub-categories, more *Embarrassed* feelings were reported in the “most memorable” ($M = 0.06, SD = 0.236$) than “most recent” ($M = 0.02, SD = 0.133$) condition, $t(266.960) = 1.970, p = .05$; in

addition, more feelings from the *Pleasant De-activation* category were reported in the “most memorable” ($M = 0.10$, $SD = 0.301$) than “most recent” ($M = 0.04$, $SD = 0.200$) condition, $t(294.705) = 2.100$, $p = .05$. In sum, these results indicate that there are a few differences in the frequencies of emotions reported per category across the two conditions, with the emotions for the “most memorable” incidents recalled being slightly more vivid (i.e., more *Embarrassment and Pleasant de-activation* feelings) than the emotions for the “most recent” incidents recalled (i.e., more *Neutral Feelings*). In particular, although there is a difference in leader reported emotions, such that leaders in the “most memorable” condition tended to report more vivid emotions, there was no apparent difference in leader reported motives (i.e., leaders did not report more external attributions in the “most memorable” condition as opposed to the “most recent” condition). These results potentially speak to the complexity of leader sensemaking processes, with leader emotions not necessarily lining up with, or affecting, leader tendencies for making external attributions for destructive behaviors.

Summary

In terms of leader motives or attributions, these results suggest that, when leaders engage in sensemaking activities for past incidents where they acted destructively, they generally make external attributions for their actions. In particular, they most commonly attribute their destructive behaviors to characteristics of followers, particularly those who merit bad treatment (i.e., through follower incompetence, deviance, bad behaviors, or other weak follower characteristics, such as personality). However, the second most common attribution that leaders make is their own feelings of hostility towards followers, which suggests that, at least in part, they can also make other types of attributions for their own actions. Although the attributions that leaders report in this study generally appear to already exist in the destructive leadership

literature (particularly those attributions that match with the victimization framework and “trickle-down” theory), this study revealed that at least a third of leader attributions match with theories that are not traditionally used to explain destructive leader behaviors (i.e., Impulsivity, Instrumental Aggression, and Conflict).

In terms of emotions, these results suggest that, while leaders mostly reported feeling negative and self-conscious emotions after engaging in destructive leader behaviors, close to a third also reported feeling no emotional reaction or positive emotions. A few leaders also reported feeling empowering negative emotions after the incident, which is not predicted by the literature; theory on impulsivity suggests that these emotions are generally only felt *before* a destructive incident (Tepper et al., 2012). The implications of these findings will be reviewed further in the discussion section.

Discussion

The current study used an inductive approach to investigate leaders' sensemaking of their own attributions behind, and specific emotions following, incidents of destructive leadership behaviors. Not only does this study reveal a diversity of motives or explanations that the literature on destructive leadership behaviors does not account for or has not fully explored, but it also offers a novel approach to studying destructive leadership by considering the leader's perspective. This study thus addresses the gap in the literature exploring how leader sensemaking activities may lead them to make different kinds of attributions for their actions than follower attributions, and which the "trickle-down" theory and the victimization framework may not consider. This study also contributes to the burgeoning field of research around leader emotions (Gooty et al., 2010), and incorporates theory on sensemaking, as well as theory and empirical findings from the attributions literature, to help explain how leaders may frame their motivations for acting destructively.

Motives and Leader Attributions

Our results reveal seven overarching motives or attributions that leaders use to explain their destructive leadership behaviors; only four of these motives (i.e., *Follower behavior*, *Top-down Pressure*, *Career Advancement* and *Displaced Aggression*), or roughly 61% of motives, were encapsulated by current deductive theories (i.e., victimization framework and "trickle-down" approach). Of the two prominent theoretical explanations, the victimization framework (which aligns with *Follower Behavior*, *Top-down Pressure* and *Career Advancement* motives in the current study) accounted for more than half, or the majority (53%), of coded leader explanations for acting destructively towards followers, while the "trickle-down" approach (or the *Displaced Aggression* motive in the current study) accounted for less than 8% of coded

leader motives for acting destructively towards followers. This finding was not only somewhat surprising, given the prominence of the “trickle-down” approach in the literature, but also suggests that leaders and followers may emphasize different motives. In particular, followers may be more likely than leaders to attribute destructive leader actions to misplaced aggression, and thus see “trickle-down” as a prominent motive for leader destructive behaviors; on the other hand, leaders may be more likely than followers to attribute their actions to qualities about the followers themselves and thus perceive motives related to the victimization framework as more prominent.

These results also suggest that, on the whole, leaders tend to make external attributions for their actions, as suggested by the actor-observer bias (Nisbett et al., 1973; Martinko et al., 2007). In particular, all motive categories, with the exception of *Hostile Emotions*, seem to reference external, or situational, influences on the leaders’ actions (i.e., characteristics about the follower; company or management pressures; leader concerns about job security; instrumental, or corrective, purposes; stress from other sources; and conflict). These motives included both those used often in the literature to explain destructive leadership (i.e., “trickle-down” approach and victimization framework; 61% of total motives), but also those that are not often invoked as explanations (i.e., conflict and instrumental aggression; 13% of total motives). Thus, although the content of these motives somewhat overlaps with prominent theoretical accounts of leader motivations, this study’s exploration of leader perspectives indicates that there still may be a gap between leaders’ and followers’ perspectives of these motives, particularly in terms of the variety of (external) motives that leaders emphasize as prominent in their sensemaking activities (i.e., at least six different motives including *Follower Behavior*, *Top-down Pressure*, *Career Advancement*, *Performance Promotion*, *Conflict*, and *Displaced Aggression*).

On the other hand, the second most frequently cited motive for destructive leader behaviors was *Hostile Emotions* (15% of total motives reported), the only motive that, at the outset, seems to align more with internal, than external, attributions. However, the prominence of this motive suggests that, when leaders engage in sensemaking, they may view their hostile emotions preceding the destructive incident as an indicator that their destructive actions were merited as a response to the situation. In particular, angry emotions not only signals to the leader an appraisal of unfairness, especially as it “corresponds to negative events caused by another person” (Frijda et al., 1989, p. 220), but is also related to the tendency to “repulse or restrain others” and often results in coercing or upsetting the other party (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994, p. 59). As a result, actions related to expressions of anger may have a corrective, and sometimes vengeful, aim. Thus, even though anger, and other hostile emotions such as frustration and irritation, may seem more like internal attributions, leaders are less likely to use hostile emotions as indications of themselves as a person (i.e., I acted destructively because I am an angry person), and more likely to use hostile emotions as informative states about the nature of their external situations (i.e., I acted destructively because this situation upset me). Thus, hostile emotions may themselves be a unique type of attribution that is neither solely internal or external. Given its lack of prominence in the literature as a motive, followers might also be less likely than leaders to see hostile emotions as driving destructive leader behaviors.

Overall, our results suggest that there are a variety of explanations that leaders generate in their sensemaking activities, most of them pertaining to external attributions (i.e., situations) for their actions, which not only aligns with the actor-observer bias (Martinko et al., 2007), but also extends understanding into how leaders may perceive their actions as necessary, given their situations. In particular, this study’s investigation of leader perspectives – i.e., how leaders

undertake sensemaking of their own destructive behaviors – reveals that further research attention may be warranted on leaders’ use of external attributions to absolve themselves of direct responsibility for harmful actions towards followers (i.e., engage in self-enhancement biases to protect their self-image; Kwang & Swann, 2010). In particular, in raising awareness of leader tendencies to use external attributions for their destructive leader behaviors, findings from this study may speak to issues of morality and ethical leadership.

Specifically, Thiel and colleagues (2012) argue that current theory on leader ethical decision-making is limited. The moral reasoning theoretical stance emphasizes that leaders “first recognize ethical problems and then apply their moral code or principles to ethical situations – suggesting that leaders today are either ignorant of the ethical dilemmas present in complex organizations or that leaders possess values or internal codes of conduct that are ‘less ethical’” (p. 49). Such a stance on why leaders engage in unethical behaviors, such as destructive leader behaviors, is overly narrow, and operates on the assumption that leaders are always aware of why they act destructively. Evidence suggests that leaders themselves may have little conscious insight into their motives for acting destructively towards the follower. For example, a meta-analysis on unethical choices in the workplace has identified unconscious, automatic tendencies, such as “personal biases or judgment errors” (Thiel et al., 2012, p. 52), as significant sources of unethical behavior (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010). As a result, not only may leaders potentially be attributing post hoc motives for their unethical, destructive behaviors, but, for that reason, many of leader motives could align with the victimization framework, as they literally place themselves as the victims of their situation and potentially avoid confronting the morality of their actions entirely.

Not only do leader perspectives of their own destructive actions reveal bias – as their subsequent recollections of the destructive incident tends to cast blame on the follower or other external factors to distance themselves from their conduct – but the discrepancy between leader and follower perspectives also reveals bias in the follower perspective as well. Specifically, this study’s results reveal that many leaders tend to externally attribute their destructive actions to follower characteristics, particularly those who perform poorly; yet, on the flip side, followers may also engage in self-protective biases to protect their own self-image and downplay any particular responsibility on their side for why leaders act destructively towards them (Sherman & Cohen, 2002). Thus, followers may also be biased towards making external attributions for destructive leader behaviors as well (i.e., my leader dislikes me). Thus, this study increases awareness of actors’ (i.e., both leaders and followers) tendency to displace blame onto external factors (Nisbett et al., 1973; Martinko et al., 2007), which should be considered in future destructive leadership research for both leader and follower perspectives.

Emotions and Destructive Leadership

Our results reveal five overarching classes of emotions that leaders reported experiencing following destructive leadership incidents. The two most prominent classes include *Other Negative Emotions* and *Self-Conscious Emotions*, which indicate that over half (56.6%) of coded emotions consist of uncomfortable feelings that leaders experience after an incident of destructive leader behavior. However, a surprising finding was that the third most prominent class of emotion was *Positive Feelings*, which indicates that roughly 20% of coded emotions were positive feelings that leaders experienced after a destructive action towards followers; in addition, over half of these emotions were leader feelings of justification or vindication in their destructive actions towards followers. Taken together with *Neutral Feelings*, which were roughly

10% of coded emotions, our findings suggest that close to a third of coded emotions were comfortable, or even pleasant, emotions that leaders experienced after a destructive leadership behavior incident.

In terms of leader sensemaking, the emotions that leaders experience after they engage in destructive behaviors seem to present a different picture from the cognitive attributions that leaders make for their actions. That is, the emotions that leaders report suggests that at least some leaders do, in fact, see their actions as flawed, despite displacing blame for their actions onto external sources. Thus, the negative emotions experienced after the incident – and that constitute the majority of emotions reported – may indicate the unsuitability of their actions and, to differing degrees, may dissuade them from engaging in these actions in the future.

In particular, *Other Negative Emotions*, which includes generally feeling upset, and *Self-Conscious Emotions*, which includes emotions such as shame, guilt, and regret, are all uncomfortable emotional reactions that leaders have in response to their destructive actions. However, generally feeling upset about one's actions is more of a "generic unpleasant state," and is "characterized by no specific readiness and no appraisal other than something important and unexpected is involved" (Frijda et al., 1989, p. 223), while feeling shame, guilt, or regret is strongly associated with the desire to "undo" one's actions (Frijda et al., 1989, p. 223) and with "low...antagonistic tendencies" (Frijda et al., 1989, p. 222). Thus, leaders who reported feeling *Self-Conscious Emotions*, as opposed to *Other Negative Emotions*, may also be less inclined to act destructively against followers in the future, as these emotions might be associated with leaders' desire to reverse their past actions and with lowered feelings of antagonism, or hostility, towards the target of the destructive action.

On the other hand, some emotions that leaders report experiencing are more consistent with the cognitive attributions that leaders make for their actions. In particular, at least 30% of emotions reported were either positive or neutral, and, when combined with external attributions that leaders tend to make, may mean that some leaders do not necessarily see their actions as flawed or may be more likely to see their actions as justified, given the situation. Thus, these positive and neutral emotions experienced after the incident – although constituting the minority of emotions reported – still make up a sizeable chunk of emotions and, in leader sensemaking activities, may provide encouraging informational cues to leaders about their actions. Thus, not only might leaders choose to believe that their actions were warranted in hindsight, but also to consider engaging in these actions in the future to rectify similar situations. In addition, Maitlis et al. (2013)'s theoretical work on attributions and emotions proposes that experiencing positive emotions after engaging in destructive leader behaviors may signal to leaders that “the situation is safe and therefore not in need of intensive sensemaking” (p. 226). Thus, leaders may be less likely to sensemake their past conduct if their destructive behavior results in positive emotion than if it results in negative emotion (Maitlis et al., 2013). Theory may also suggest that leaders are less likely to question, or alter, their positive interpretations of past conduct and may well engage in the same actions again, given the same situation.

Interestingly, this study also found that some leaders reported continuing to experience hostile emotions *after* the incident has occurred. Previous theory (e.g., Tepper et al., 2012) has generally only considered the effect of hostile emotions *before* a destructive incident, particularly as a trigger that results in leaders' engaging in destructive behaviors towards followers. Hostile emotions may continue to sustain leaders' desires to act destructively towards followers. In leaders' sensemaking activities, an emotion such as anger is likely to be interpreted as not only

“unpleasant,” but also “willfully caused by someone else, and, as the action readiness, to oppose or retaliate” (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994, p. 62). Thus, because hostile emotions may be associated with the behavioral tendency to oppose or retaliate even after the incident is over, hostile emotions may also provide leaders with an emotional cue that their actions were justified and may incline them towards acting destructively towards followers again in the future. Moreover, Maitlis et al. (2013) suggest that, while negative emotions, such as hostile emotions, are more likely to trigger sensemaking processes, specifically to “promote problem identification,” engaging in the sensemaking activity itself is paradoxically more likely to promote positive moods after, due to its generative effect in creating methods to address the problems that prompted sensemaking to occur (p. 232). Thus, theory may also suggest that positive moods generated by sensemaking may also serve as cues of justification to leaders, confirming that they engaged in an appropriate action.

Difference between Study Conditions

For leader motives, there were only a few differences between the two study conditions, “most memorable” and “most recent”. Specifically, we expected these two conditions to differ somewhat (i.e., that the “most memorable” condition, more than the “most recent” condition, evokes more recollections of egregious, or serious, destructive incidents, thus causing leaders to make more, versus less, external attributions for their actions), as previous research (e.g., Pryor & Kriss, 1977) has found evidence to suggest that the salience of information affects the types of attributions that people are likely to make. Thus, given that “most memorable incidents” are likely to be more salient, we expected that leaders were likely to make different types of attributions for these types of incidents. However, the only difference between conditions was that more *Conflict* motives were reported in the “most memorable” than in the “most recent”

condition. This finding may suggest that, at least for cognitive types of leader sensemaking – i.e., the tendency to make more external attributions – most destructive leadership behaviors are fairly memorable and elicit similar types of sensemaking processes. That is, regardless of the type of destructive incident recalled, whether memorable or recent, leaders are likely to make external attributions as predicted by the actor-observer bias (Nisbett et al., 1973). Thus, leaders are equally likely between these two conditions to view external agents as causing their actions, which suggests that leaders are equally likely to minimize, or experience diminished, personal responsibility for their actions.

On the other hand, for leader emotions, there were several differences between the two study conditions, which suggests that leaders' experienced emotions may not always align with the types of attributions they make. In particular, if “most memorable” incidents did result in leaders reporting more intense emotions (i.e., increased *Self-conscious*, *Other Negative*, and *Hostility* emotions, and fewer *Neutral* emotions), theory suggests that we should also expect leaders to engage in more retrospective sensemaking activities after engaging in destructive incidents, perhaps resulting more external attributions being made (Maitlis et al., 2013). In the present study, more *Embarrassed* and *Pleasant/De-activation Emotions* were indeed reported in the “most memorable” than in the “most recent” condition, while more *Neutral Emotions* were reported in the “most recent” than in the “most memorable” condition. However, while leader emotions for “most memorable” incidents may be more vivid, charged, or dramatic than emotions for “most recent” incidents, leader external attributions generally remained consistent across conditions. This result could also indicate the robustness of leaders' biases towards making external attributions, such that leaders are simply more likely to make more external attributions when simply faced with a particularly self-threatening incident to leaders' self-

conceptions (i.e., incidents of destructive leader behaviors towards followers; Maitlis et al., 2013).

Limitations and Future Directions

The findings from this study addressed the study's initial aims, which sought to investigate the leader's perspective of their destructive leader behaviors, particularly to capture their sensemaking processes for why they engaged in these actions. In particular, this study demonstrates that, as predicted by the actor-observer bias, leaders tend to make more external attributions when they sensemake their destructive leader actions than the followers' perspective, or the literature, would otherwise suggest or emphasize. In particular, a third of leaders also tend to experience positive or neutral emotional reactions after their actions, which suggests not only that they may be less likely to sensemake their actions, but may indicate increased likelihood that they will engage in destructive leader actions again.

However, follow-up research should attempt to clarify the leaders' sensemaking perspectives, particularly the relationships between leader attributions and leader emotions, and how sensemaking may enable, or possibly prevent, future destructive leader actions. Firstly, follow-up research should replicate the current study, by investigating whether the same themes that emerged in leader responses for this study also emerge in subsequent studies, or whether other themes emerge when a different type of content analysis approach is used (i.e., conventional content analysis approach). Secondly, follow-up research should also investigate, and clarify, potential boundary conditions for how and when leaders are more likely to make external attributions for their destructive leader actions, and whether decreased likelihood for making external attributions also leads to decreased likelihood of engaging in destructive leader actions. For example, leaders with a higher sense of moral identity, or conscientiousness, may be

more likely to feel responsibility for their actions and may be less likely to make external attributions. Thirdly, follow-up research should also attempt to more thoroughly investigate the link between emotions and sensemaking. In particular, it may be helpful to test theoretical predictions (i.e., Maitlis et al., 2013) for how leader emotions may spur leader sensemaking, and how this relationship in turn affects destructive leader actions. For example, leaders may be more likely to make external attributions when they have experienced an incident that made them feel more negative emotions, as opposed to positive emotions, because negative emotions may cause them to engage in more sense-making.

This study also only looks at destructive leadership behaviors from the leader's perspective. It may be interesting for future research to also look at the followers' perspectives of their leaders' actions, and directly compare followers' sensemaking processes – particularly the attributions they make for the leaders' actions – with leaders' sensemaking processes regarding the same event to more thoroughly understand the gap in perspective between leaders and followers. Followers' sensemaking processes, as with the leaders' perspective, may operate using similar biases (i.e., actor-observer bias; Nisbett et al., 1973, Martinko et al., 2007), with more internal attributions made for the leaders' destructive behaviors. In particular, dyadic sensemaking perspectives (i.e., considering both follower and leader perspectives within a leader-follower pairing) may be fruitful for better understanding when destructive leadership is a shared experience (i.e., both leader and follower consider the leader to have acted destructively towards a follower), and when destructive leadership might only be considered as such from one party or the other.

Future research should also consider third-party perspectives, and the potential gap between these perspectives and the leaders' and the followers'. Third-party perspectives may

provide insight into when leaders are likely to be condoned, excused, or condemned for their destructive actions and could contribute as well to the sensemaking literature in general. For example, third-party observers might have different types of sensemaking profiles – or different ways of rationalizing – destructive leader behaviors witnessed against their coworkers compared to leaders and co-workers against whom leaders have acted destructively, depending on their relationship with the coworker or individual differences in moral identity.

This study is also not without its limitations. Firstly, the coding scheme that was developed for use in the current study needs to be further tested for its reliability using additional coders. The current study focused heavily on the development of both the motivations and emotions coding schemes and on sorting leaders' recalled destructive incidents according to themes that emerged among respondents. However, the current coding procedures would benefit immensely from having another independent researcher review, and potentially further refine, these categories. In addition, by having multiple coders code the data, as well as calculating agreement between coders, the independence of the categories within the coding scheme, as well as its reliability between different coders, can be better determined and verified.

Secondly, this study asked each leader to provide only one incident, so there is limited insight into whether these attributions or emotional experiences after the fact are stable (i.e., the same leader will make the same type of attribution or experience the same emotional reaction) or situationally derived (i.e., the same leader will make different types of attributions and experience different emotional outcomes for different incidents depending on the situation). Future research should consider having leaders report multiple incidents to better understand the nature of destructive leader attributions and affective reactions.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Findings from this study indicate that leaders may be biased in the attributions they make for their destructive leader actions; in particular, they tend to focus on more external determinants of their actions than followers do. Although their general tendencies to experience negative emotional reactions after these actions suggest, generally, that they may be less likely to engage in those actions again, the damage that their actions may have already caused followers (e.g., decreased job attitudes, etc.) may be difficult to undo. Thus, to deter leaders from engaging in destructive leader actions in the first place, upper management may want to consider ways of both preventing leaders from emphasizing external attributions in general, as well as increasing leader acceptance of negative emotional reactions in response to certain events without acting on these reactions.

In particular, management could consider using interventions that teach leaders about the importance of engaging in state mindfulness – that is, leaders could be taught to direct attention towards their current experience without indulging in mindless behaviors (i.e., controlling habitual tendencies), as well as accept their experience of the present, however positive or negative, without acting on their feelings associated with this experience (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness has been found to moderate the effect of leader hostility on destructive leadership, specifically abusive supervision; leaders with higher, versus lower, mindfulness are less likely to act on hostile impulses towards followers (Liang et al., 2016). Thus, interventions that improve leaders' state mindfulness may be helpful in decreasing destructive leader behaviors in two ways: leaders could be less likely to engage in habitual tendencies to make external attributions, while, at the same time, could develop higher acceptance for feeling negative emotion states without necessarily acting on them (i.e., accepting feelings of frustration towards followers without necessarily engaging in vengeful actions towards them).

Conclusion

This study incorporates a sensemaking lens for studying destructive leadership; in particular, it fills a gap in the destructive leader literature by exploring different kinds of attributions that leaders can or will make for their destructive leader behaviors and their emotional reactions after committing these actions. The current study's findings appear to align with theory on attributions, which suggests that leaders will generally make external attributions for their destructive actions towards followers. Understanding how leaders engage in sensemaking around their negative actions provides some indication of leaders' tendency to externalize blame for these actions to other sources, even if their (predominantly negative) emotional reactions enables them to gauge their actions' unsuitability. Therefore, the findings from this preliminary study suggest that, for future research looking into designing interventions to prevent destructive leader behaviors, a place to start might be to find ways to target and discourage leaders' tendencies to make external attributions for their actions.

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Appendix

Table 1

Themes That Emerged From Leader Written Responses About Their Feelings After Acting Destructively Their Followers

Themes	Category Name	Examples of Quotes
Self-Conscious Emotions	Guilty	"I felt very guilty for not just coming out and saying that it was me that had made the mistake."
	Embarrassed	"i felt embarrassed that i acted like that in front of my other employees [sic]"
	Ashamed	"I felt horribly ashamed...about it."
	Self-blame/personal responsibility	"I felt very bad and was even angry at myself for putting them down..."
	Regret	"I regretted my decision...I would have acted differently if I was given a second chance."
	Repentance	"I never really apologized to him but I feel very sorry for that day's incident."
Hostility	Angry/Irritated	"I felt very angry afterwards"
	Frustrated	"I felt very frustrated after this incident."
Other Negative Emotions	Unpleasant/Activation (Tense, Nervous, Stressed, Upset)	"I felt really bad and felt that my reaction wasn't necessary"
	Unpleasant/De-activation (Sad, Depressed, Lethargic, Fatigued)	"I felt...disappointed that she was not operating at a higher level of understanding given her years in the position."
Neutral Feelings	Neutral (Feeling Fine, No Feeling)	"I felt fine. He took it lightheartedly and it was no big deal."
Positive Feelings	Pleasant/Activation (Alert, Excited, Elated, Happy, "Great")	"I felt terrific – like throwing a party. I could not have been more delighted."
	Pleasant/De-activation (Contented, Serene, Relaxed, Calm, "Good", "Relieved")	"[it] was actually a relief...It was sort of therapeutic."
	Justified/Vindicated	"I felt like it was a necessary but difficult task, and that in the end we would all be better off because of it."
Miscellaneous	Others	"I felt slimy. I really don't like to be mean to people."
	Ambivalent (both good and bad)	"Good and bad. She did not take it very well, but the issue has resolved itself since as she and everyone else now does the task correctly."

Table 2

Themes That Emerged From Leader Written Responses About Their Motivations Behind Acting Destructively Their Followers

Themes	Category Names	Examples of Quotations
Hostile Emotions	Anger	“Anger. I lost my temper. It didn’t help anything just made him feel worse.”
	Frustration	“It arose out of frustration. The feeling that the words you say are not being heard.”
	Others (e.g., moodiness, resentment, irritation)	“I was irritated because she missed a deadline.”
Follower Behavior	Follower Poor Performance	“I was motivated to tell him off and remind him of his past failures by the way he was acting. He knew we had a deadline and he knew we were relying on his work for part of the assignment, but he was slacking as if he didn’t care about the work or how his actions would affect us.”
	Repeated Offense	“She had engaged in the same mistake over and over again when she should have done her job and memorized the table numbers.”
	Follower Deviance (disrespectful, spreads gossip, the way the follower talks to others)	“Her comments and criticisms toward others made me angry and I felt that she was inhibiting the group from having a productive dialogue. I also felt somewhat resentful toward the way she was acting and I felt personally insulted.”
	Weak Follower/Other Follower Characteristics (e.g., talkative/cocky)	“He was cocky and felt he ‘knew it all’ and didn’t need my input about the job I assigned him”
Top-Down Performance Pressure	Necessity (told to by boss, under strict observation by boss)	“The slave drivers above me give me very ridiculous requirements and prefer me to keep a large paper trail instead of actually addressing issues. I guess my motivations were job security.”
	Protect Company Reputation	“I had to protect our company and reputation. I also had to protect our clients.”
	Organizational-Relevance (Impact Organizational Performance)	“I had to take her extra day off away for the good of the company. If I had let her have the day off everyone else would have had to work overtime to cover her end of the work.”
	Other Company Pressures (high risk of company losses at stake,	“I was really upset that the subordinate had cost the company so much money. I was incredibly upset.”

	follower costed the company money)	
	Concern for Management Backlash	“I didn’t want to get in trouble with the owner. I felt like she already didn’t like me, and didn’t want to further strain our professional relationship.”
	Concern for Impression Management in front of the boss	“My motivation was for me and my team to look good to a higher supervisor.”
Career Advancement	Self-Relevance (Impact Own Performance)	“It’s a constant strain on me to always chase after him and make sure he isn’t doing something half-assed again.”
	Face Concern (exert authority, intimidation) and Self Preservation	“I was looking out for myself. He was coming for my position!”
Performance Promotion Motive	Deterrence (show others this cannot be tolerated, prevent future occurrence)	“I wanted to make sure that the others within the lab knew that this kind of behavior wasn’t acceptable, and I also wanted to share in their frustration that a team-member wasn’t pulling their weight.”
	Send Clear Message (show follower this is wrong)	“I was angry at how lazy he is with his job. I couldn’t rely on him and needed to act harshly to get my point across.”
	Informing Progress/Learn From Mistakes/Future Improvement	“He was not meeting the standard expected of him, so I needed to address this so that he could either improve his performance, or so that I could proceed with removing him from the position if he did not improve his performance in the future.”
Displaced Aggression	Stress	“I was already frazzled from the rest of the things I was trying to do, and he was just the straw that broke the camel’s back I guess.”
	Frustration with Alternative Source	“I was reprimanded by my boss for not realizing a certain assignment was needing to be done. I was reprimanded so I passed on my anger and frustration”
Conflict	Relational Conflict	“M’s reactions were very defensive and aggressive toward me and attacked my personal values.”
	General Conflict	“Everyone dislikes her, including myself, she causes more problems than she solves, I’ve had multiple complaints about her from students and parents. Honestly, I want her to quit.”
Miscellaneous	Fear	“I was motivated by fear mostly. The patient could have easily died.”
	Disappointment	“I am disappointed [by] how immature he acts.”

Want to Hurt
follower/Dislike
the Follower

“She was terrible and I hated her. I fucking HATE her.”

Others (defensive
mechanism,
aggressive
humour, wanting
to look good in
front of the
follower, self-
blame)

“She was attractive and I was interested in her (as well
as some other guys) and I did not want to show
favoritism.”

Table 3
Breakdown of General Motive Categories For Destructive Leadership: Overall And By Condition

Motives for Destructive Leadership	Theoretical Perspectives	Overall (n = 338)		Most Memorable Condition (n = 170)		Most Recent Condition (n = 168)		Difference Between “Most Memorable” and “Most Recent” Conditions
		# of Codes	%	# of Codes	%	# of Codes	%	
Follower Behavior	Victimization	194	0.38	102	0.40	92	0.37	$t(336) = .97$
Hostile Emotions	Impulsivity	77	0.15	38	0.15	39	0.16	$t(336) = -.19$
Top-down Pressure	Victimization	47	0.09	28	0.11	19	0.08	$t(329.09) = 1.37$
Displaced Aggression	"Trickle-down"	38	0.08	14	0.05	24	0.10	$t(316.49) = -1.76$
Performance-promotion	Instrumental aggression	36	0.07	19	0.07	17	0.07	$t(336) = .31$
Conflict	Conflict	31	0.06	22	0.09	9	0.04	$t(295.88) = .44^*$
Career Advancement	Victimization	27	0.05	13	0.05	14	0.06	$t(336) = -.23$
Miscellaneous	Others	55	0.11	22	0.09	33	0.13	$t(325.60) = -1.67$
Total Number of Codes		505	1	258	1	247	1	

Note. * $p < .05$

Table 4

Breakdown of Specific Motive Categories For Destructive Leadership: Overall and By Condition

Motives for Destructive Leadership	Theoretical Perspectives	Specific Motives	Overall (n = 338)		"Most Memorable" Condition (n = 170)		"Most Recent" Condition (n = 168)		Difference Between Conditions
			# of Codes	%	# of Codes	%	# of Codes	%	
Follower Behavior	Victimization	Follower Poor Performance	91	0.15	49	0.15	42	0.14	<i>t</i> (336) = .79
		Repeated Offense	56	0.09	31	0.10	25	0.08	<i>t</i> (336) = .83
		Follower Deviance	52	0.08	26	0.08	26	0.08	<i>t</i> (336) = -.05
		Weak Follower/Other Follower Characteristics (e.g., talkative/cocky)	87	0.14	36	0.11	51	0.17	<i>t</i> (336) = -1.94
Hostile Emotions	Impulsivity	Anger	34	0.05	20	0.06	14	0.05	<i>t</i> (329.506) = 1.05
		Frustration	36	0.06	17	0.05	19	0.06	<i>t</i> (336) = -.39
		Others (e.g., moodiness)	16	0.03	8	0.03	8	0.03	<i>t</i> (336) = -.02
Top-down Pressure	Victimization	Necessity	11	0.02	6	0.02	5	0.02	<i>t</i> (336) = .29
		Protect Company Reputation	1	0.00	1	0.00	0	0.00	<i>t</i> (169) = 1.00
		Organizational-Relevance	13	0.02	8	0.03	5	0.02	<i>t</i> (336) = .83
		Other Company Pressures	14	0.02	10	0.03	4	0.01	<i>t</i> (290.111) = 1.62
		Concern for Management Backlash	6	0.01	4	0.01	2	0.01	<i>t</i> (336) = .81

		Concern for Impression Management in front of the boss	9	0.01	5	0.02	4	0.01	$t(336) = .32$
Displaced Aggression	“Trickle-down”	Stress	19	0.03	6	0.02	13	0.04	$t(296.436) = -1.68$
		Frustration with Alternative Source	19	0.03	8	0.03	11	0.04	$t(336) = -.73$
Performance- promotion motive	Instrumental Aggression	Deterrence	12	0.02	6	0.02	6	0.02	$t(336) = -.02$
		Send Clear Message	16	0.03	7	0.02	9	0.03	$t(336) = -.54$
		Informing Progress/Learn from Mistakes/Future Improvement	16	0.03	10	0.03	6	0.02	$t(330.397) = 1.00$
Conflict	Conflict	Relational Conflict	18	0.03	13	0.04	5	0.02	$t(287.907) = 1.92$
		General Conflict	14	0.02	9	0.03	5	0.02	$t(315.089) = 1.07$
Career Advancement	Victimization	Self-Relevance	14	0.02	7	0.02	7	0.02	$t(336) = -.02$
		Face Concern & Self Preservation	15	0.02	8	0.03	7	0.02	$t(336) = .24$
Miscellaneous	Other	Fear	5	0.01	1	0.00	4	0.01	$t(245.374) = -1.36$
		Disappointment	4	0.01	3	0.01	1	0.00	$t(272.955) = .10$
		Want to Hurt Follower/Dislike Follower	13	0.02	4	0.01	9	0.03	$t(292.160) = -1.43$
		Others (e.g., defense mechanism)	33	0.05	14	0.04	19	0.06	$t(336) = -.95$
Total Number of Codes			624	1	317	1	307	1	

Note. * $p < .05$

Table 5
Breakdown of General Emotion Categories Following Destructive Leadership: Overall And By Condition

Emotions Following Destructive Leadership	Overall (n = 338)		Most memorable (n =170)		Most recent (n = 168)		Difference Between Most Memorable and Most Recent Conditions
	# of Codes	%	# of Codes	%	# of Codes	%	
Other Negative Emotions	141	0.31	70	0.31	71	0.31	$t(336) = -.20$
Self-Conscious Emotions	118	0.26	59	0.26	59	0.26	$t(336) = -.08$
Positive Feelings	89	0.19	46	0.20	43	0.19	$t(336) = .31$
Neutral Feelings	45	0.10	15	0.07	30	0.13	$t(307.746) = -2.46^*$
Hostility	36	0.08	20	0.09	16	0.07	$t(336) = .67$
Miscellaneous	29	0.06	18	0.08	11	0.05	$t(322.678) = 1.33$
Total Number of Codes	458	1	228	1	230	1	

Note. * $p < .05$

Table 6
Breakdown of Specific Emotion Categories Following Destructive Leadership: Overall and By Condition

Emotions Following Destructive Leadership	Specific Emotions	Overall (n = 338)		Most Memorable Condition (n = 170)		Most Recent Condition (n = 168)		Difference Between Conditions
		# of Codes	%	# of Codes	%	# of Codes	%	
		Other Negative Emotions	Unpleasant/Activation (Tense, Nervous, Stressed, Upset)	131	0.27	66	0.27	
	Unpleasant/De-activation (Sad, Depressed, Lethargic, Fatigued)	11	0.02	4	0.02	7	0.03	$t(336) = -.94$
Self-Conscious Emotions	Guilty	47	0.10	19	0.08	28	0.11	$t(325.673) = -1.46$
	Embarrassed	13	0.03	10	0.04	3	0.01	$t(266.960) = 1.97^*$
	Ashamed	9	0.02	4	0.02	5	0.02	$t(336) = -.36$
	Self-blame/personal responsibility	21	0.04	7	0.03	14	0.06	$t(303.034) = -1.60$
	Regret	28	0.06	18	0.07	10	0.04	$t(316.929) = 1.55$
	Repentance	16	0.03	9	0.04	7	0.03	$t(336) = .49$
Positive Feelings	Pleasant/Activation (Alert, Excited, Elated, Happy, "Great")	9	0.02	5	0.02	4	0.02	$t(336) = .32$
	Pleasant/De-activation (Contented, Serene, Relaxed, Calm, "Good", "Relieved")	24	0.05	17	0.07	7	0.03	$t(294.705) = 2.10^*$
	Justified/Vindicated	62	0.13	27	0.11	35	0.14	$t(331.479) = -1.17$
Neutral Feelings	Neutral (Feeling Fine, No Feeling)	45	0.09	15	0.06	30	0.12	$t(307.746) = -2.46^*$
Hostility	Angry/Irritated	26	0.05	16	0.07	10	0.04	$t(323.613) = 1.19$
	Frustrated	16	0.03	8	0.03	8	0.03	$t(336) = -.02$
Miscellaneous	Others	22	0.05	12	0.05	10	0.04	$t(336) = .41$
	Ambivalent (both good and bad)	7	0.01	6	0.02	1	0.00	$t(226.577) = 1.91$
Total Number of Codes		487	1	243	1	244	1	

Note. * $p < .05$