Ethical Followership: An Examination of Followership Beliefs and Crimes of Obedience

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Abstract

This study seeks to "reverse the lens" in leadership and ethics research by investigating whether follower (rather than leader) characteristics are associated with intentions to engage in unethical behavior. Specifically, we examine whether followers' beliefs about the coproduction of leadership and the romance of leadership are related to their willingness to commit a "crime of obedience" by complying with a leader's unethical request. Using a vignette depicting an unethical demand by a leader, 161 working adults were asked to indicate whether they would obey or challenge the leader's request. Regression analyses show that individuals with weaker coproduction beliefs demonstrate a stronger intent to obey unethical requests, whereas individuals with stronger coproduction beliefs demonstrate a stronger intent to engage in constructive resistance. This relationship is partially mediated by displacement of responsibility. Findings also identify an interaction between followers' belief in the coproduction of leadership and romance of leadership, such that individuals with stronger coproduction beliefs who romanticize leaders reported a stronger intent to obey unethical requests. Results are discussed in relation to research on obedience to authority and burgeoning research on followership.

Most discussions about organizational ethics emphasize the role that leaders play in modeling, promoting, and reinforcing ethical behavior in the workplace (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Kohlberg, 1969; Treviño, 1986; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003). The basic assumption in the literature and in practice is that leader behaviors (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009) and their effects on climate (Treviño, Butterfield, & McCabe, 1998; Treviño, Weaver, Gibson, & Toffler, 1999) are the most critical antecedents to ethical behavior in organizations. However, the ethical lapses during the past decade (e.g., WorldCom) show that it is often the *leaders* who act unethically and/or demand unethical actions from followers (Whittington & Pany, 2009). Indeed, the 2011 National Business Ethics Survey conducted by the Ethics Resource Center (2012) found that 34% of employees "had a negative view of their supervisor's ethics." These findings clearly indicate that relying on leader ethical behavior is not enough. We need to also focus on the role of followers in maintaining ethical behavior in organizations (Hollander, 1995; Perreault, 1997).

An area that has been identified as important regarding the role of followers in organizational ethics is followers' responses to unethical requests by a leader (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007). Followers face ethical dilemmas when leaders approach them with inappropriate requests, such as asking them to engage in behaviors that are clearly unethical. In such situations, followers must make a decision: They can choose to stand up to the unethical request (e.g., by challenging the leader's directive, refusing to engage in unethical behavior, or proposing alternative courses of action) or they can go along with the leader's request, in essence becoming complicit with the unethical behavior. This choice will likely be associated with their beliefs about the follower role and how followers should interact with leaders. For followers to be able to stand up to a leader's unethical request, they must not view their followership role as passive and obedient. Instead, they must feel a responsibility as an active participant in the leadership process (Baker, 2007; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Chaleff, 2009; Hirschhorn, 1990; Kelley, 1992; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007).

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Burgeoning research on followership suggests that individuals hold a variety of beliefs about the role followers should play in the leadership process (Carsten et al., 2010; Sy, 2010). For example, Carsten et al. (2010) found that some followers construct their roles along traditional definitions of followers being deferent and blindly obedient, whereas others construct their roles around partnership and contribution and focus on engaging in more leader-like (e.g., influencing, voicing, decision making) than follower-like behaviors (Carsten et al., 2010). According to Shamir (2007), this more active and engaging dimension comprises the "coproduction" of leadership, which involves leaders and followers working together to effect important organizational outcomes.

Building from these initial findings, Carsten and Uhl-Bien (2009) developed and validated a measure of follower beliefs in the coproduction of leadership—the extent to which people believe their role as a follower is to partner with leaders in an effort to coproduce positive leadership outcomes. Their findings show that follower belief in the coproduction of leadership is significantly and positively related to behaviors such as voice and upward influence behavior and negatively related to beliefs in power distance and legitimacy of authority. These results suggest that individuals with a stronger belief in the coproduction of leadership are more likely to voice ideas and concerns, influence leaders to gain support and resources, and are less likely to see their role as ineffectual or insignificant. Taken together, these results suggest that followers' beliefs about coproduction are related to how individuals enact the follower role in organizations.

Coproduction beliefs may increase understanding of the choices followers make when faced with an unethical request by a leader. For example, followers with weaker coproduction beliefs likely act more traditionally as followers, seeing that it is their responsibility to defer to a leader by obeying and following the leader's unethical request. Followers with stronger coproduction beliefs are likely to believe it is their duty to object to a leader's unethical request for the good of the organization (Carsten et al., 2010). Such followers are likely to work to find an ethical solution in the face of an unethical request by a leader and less likely to see themselves as powerless to a leader's directive. Thus, it is likely that followers with stronger coproduction beliefs demonstrate "ethical followership" by responding to a leader's unethical request in ways that help maintain ethical behavior in the workplace, whereas followers with weaker coproduction beliefs may demonstrate "unethical followership" by being complicit in the unethical behavior.

The purpose of this study was to conduct an initial investigation into the concept of ethical/unethical followership. Specifically, we examined whether follower beliefs in the coproduction of leadership predict their intentions to stand up to, or comply with, unethical requests by a leader. Followers who comply with unethical requests, meaning they engage in unethical behavior under leaders' directives, can be described as engaging in "crimes of obedience" (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). They likely are able to act in this way because they displace responsibility for the unethical act from themselves to their leader (Bandura, 1991; Milgram, 1965, 1974; Rost, 1979).

We begin by reviewing research on obedience to authority and discuss displacement of responsibility as a necessary precursor to obedient responses. In addition, we also address disobedient responses that followers may have to an unethical request by a leader. Given that fewer studies have looked at the relationship between personal characteristics and disobedience (Perreault, 1997), we examined both the obedient and disobedient (e.g., constructive resistance) responses that followers may have to unethical demands of superiors. Following this, we discuss research on coproduction beliefs (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2009) and romance of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985) to understand whether these beliefs play a role in predicting both displacement of responsibility and a follower's ultimate decision to obey or disobey a leader's unethical request. The theoretical model that was tested in this study, and explained more thoroughly in the sections below, is shown in Figure 1.

Followers Reactions to Unethical Requests by a Leader

Crimes of Obedience

Kelman and Hamilton (1989, p. 46) define crimes of obedience as "acts performed in response to orders from authority that are considered illegal or immoral by the larger community." Throughout history, crimes of obedience have occurred in the My Lai massacre, Nazi concentration camps, and more recently in the destructive corporate business practices of companies such as Enron, WorldCom, and Arthur Anderson (Zahra, Priem, & Rasheed, 2007). In the business setting, crimes of obedience occur when subordinates willingly follow an unethical or illegal directive of a superior. For example, evidence suggests that the ethical violations that occurred at Enron were, in some cases, ordered by top management to inflate corporate revenue (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2007).

According to Hollander (1995), ethical lapses such as this occur because leaders are perceived to have "power over" followers, and followers believe they are too weak to counter the unethical demands of their leaders (Biggart & Hamilton, 1984). For crimes of obedience to occur, Kelman and Hamilton (1989) suggested that followers must see the leader's power and authority as legitimate. The perception of legitimacy leaves followers feeling powerless, as if they
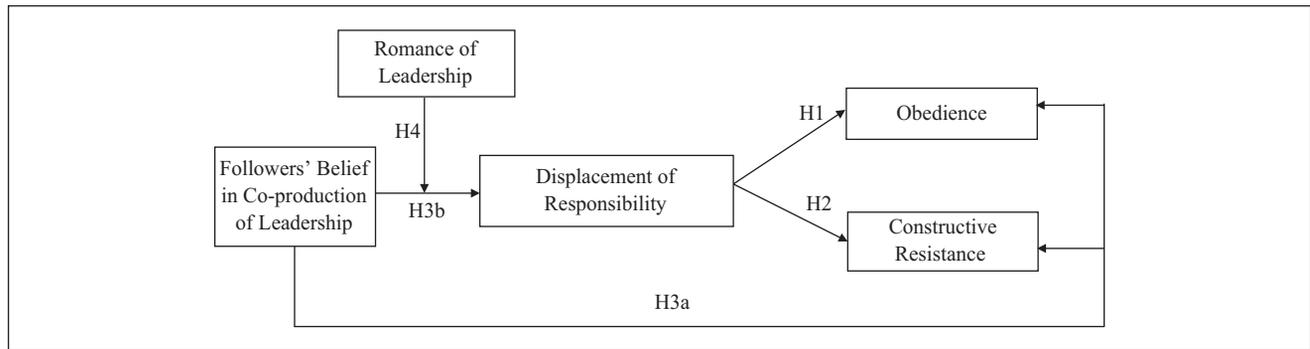
Figure 1. Theoretical model with hypotheses

have no choice but to obey their leader's commands (Tyler, 1997). In essence, followers feel they must take a "one-down" position in the presence of their leaders, obeying a leader's directive because their lower status role requires them to do so (Baker, 2007; Ravlin & Thomas, 2005).

Research on obedience confirms these status effects. In addition, it shows that individuals who obey unethical directives also displace responsibility onto the authority figure, perceiving they were not at fault because they were in a subordinate position (Milgram, 1974). This displacement of responsibility is a key element of moral disengagement—a social–cognitive mechanism that allows individuals to engage in unethical acts by disconnecting the moral ramifications of an action from their own involvement in that action (Bandura, 1991). According to Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson (1975), individuals may displace responsibility for unethical or immoral actions onto a leader because they perceive the leader to have greater agency than they do. This helps them escape the negativity of their immoral behavior by attributing responsibility for that behavior onto someone other than themselves (Bandura, 1999).

Bandura (1991) stated that one's propensity to displace responsibility is a trait-like characteristic. Similarly, Blass (2009) suggested that those who participate in it are more likely to engage in obedience than those who feel responsibility for the unethical dilemma. Rost (1979) argued that actors who displace responsibility are likely to believe they can avoid punishment because it is the authority figure who is responsible for the unethical act. Milgram's studies (1965) found that actors who continued to inflict harm on participants who were clearly demonstrating pain and discomfort stated they were simply "following orders." These participants further stated that it was the *experimenter* who was responsible for the pain that was inflicted on the learner because the experimenter was the "expert."

Hence, a large body of research supports the strong link between an individual's propensity to displace responsibility and their subsequent obedience to authority figures (see Blass, 2009, for a review; see also Burger 2009; Milgram,

1965, 1974; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Therefore, we believe displacement of responsibility will be a key mechanism in the relationship between followership beliefs and crimes of obedience. Specifically, we hypothesize that followers who demonstrate intent to engage in crimes of obedience by complying with a leader's unethical request are likely to do so because they have displaced responsibility on to the leader.

> *Hypothesis 1*: Displacement of responsibility is positively associated with intent to obey a leader's unethical request.

Constructive Resistance

Whereas displacement of responsibility has been linked to obedience in unethical situations, few studies have investigated the reactions of individuals who fail to displace responsibility (i.e., those who assume personal responsibility) or the various ways in which individuals may choose to *disobey* (Modigliani & Rochat, 1995). Thus, we examine antecedents to resistance, given that so few studies have explored resistance to unethical requests by a leader.

Obedience studies conducted by Milgram (1965, 1974) and others (see Blass, 2009, for a review) suggest that approximately 35% of individuals resist the unethical demands of a leader. In a replication of Milgram's experiment, Modigliani and Rochat (1995) found that participants who protested the leader's instructions early in the experiment showed greater felt responsibility and a greater likelihood of disobeying the experimenter at the end of the experiment when the electric shock became unbearable for the participant. Milgram (1974) concluded that the difference between those who obeyed and those who protested was likely due to complex differences in personal characteristics. However, his early experiments did not reveal such differences. As a result, subsequent research has largely focused on the situational characteristics that predict whether someone obeys or disobeys (Milgram, 1965; also

see Miller, Collins, & Brief, 1995, for a review), and only a handful of studies have looked at the personal characteristics that predict *disobedient responses* (Blass, 1991; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989).

According to a review by Blass (1991), several personality and social belief variables may predict obedience/disobedience to unethical requests. For example, personality variables such as authoritarianism (Elms & Milgram, 1966) and trust in superiors (Blass, 1991) have been associated with higher levels of obedience. Blass (1991) also suggests that an individual's belief in power and status differentials may explain why one obeys or disobeys unethical demands. In addition to these followership-oriented characteristics, other individual-level variables have also been associated with obedience in unethical situations. For example, a review by Treviño (1986) showed that individual difference variables such as locus of control, field dependence, and ego strength influence decisions to act ethically.

Related to the discussion of moral disengagement, the decision to resist may be associated with a propensity to displace responsibility elsewhere—in this case, onto the leader (Hinrichs, 2007). Whereas followers who displace responsibility are likely to engage in unethical conduct, followers who believe that the decision to act ethically falls on them rather than the leader likely show resistance to a leader's unethical request (Bandura, 1999; Rost, 1979). Indeed, there is evidence that the decision to disobey is associated with felt responsibility (Wood & Bandura, 1989) and that the rate of disobedience increases when individual responsibility is made salient by an experimenter or bystanders (Milgram, 1974).

One form of disobedience may involve followers' constructively challenging their leader's request. Tepper, Duffy, and Shaw (2001) argued that constructive resistance occurs when followers directly object to a leader's request by making suggestions for alternative actions or presenting reasons for noncompliance. In these situations, followers may use such resistance strategies to open a line of dialogue with their leader when they perceive that a leader's request is imprudent or illogical (Tepper et al., 2006). Followers who respond to a leader's request with constructive resistance score high on conscientiousness and receive high performance ratings from managers (Tepper et al., 2006). In the face of an unethical request proposed by a leader, constructive resistance has the potential to provide the most positive outcomes with regard to upholding ethical codes.

Given the risk associated with resisting a leader's request (see Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003), we hypothesized that followers who engage in constructive resistance do so only if they feel a high degree of responsibility for the ethical dilemma (i.e., they score low on displacement of responsibility). Specifically, followers who maintain a sense of personal responsibility likely do not see themselves as safeguarded against the negative ramifications of unethical

conduct. Thus, they are likely to be concerned about remorse and regret associated with obeying unethical demands of a leader (Rost, 1979). Indeed, followers who fail to displace responsibility are likely to feel it is their duty to speak up, present reasons for noncompliance, and recommend alternative courses of action that better serve their department or organization.

> *Hypothesis 2*: Displacement of responsibility is negatively associated with followers' intention to constructively challenge their leader's unethical request.

Followers' Belief in the Coproduction of Leadership

Consistent with the discussion of status effects and obedience to authority, emerging work on followership is examining the beliefs individuals have about the role that followers play in the leadership process (Carsten et al., 2010; De Cremer & Van Dijk, 2005; De Vries & Van Gelder, 2005; Gerber, 1988). For example, Carsten and colleagues (Carsten et al., 2010; Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2009) developed a construct that measures followers' belief in the coproduction of leadership. Belief in the coproduction of leadership is defined as the extent to which an individual believes that followers should partner with leaders to influence and enhance the leadership process. These beliefs about the follower role, and the extent to which followers should partner with leaders, develop over time as individuals began to interact with others in positions of authority (Kuhn & Laird, 2011; Louis, 1980; Ravlin & Thomas, 2005). When acting as a follower, individuals rely on their beliefs to direct their behavior. The theory of reasoned action states that beliefs form the foundation for attitudes, which in turn affect behavioral intentions (see Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977, for a review; see also Ajzen, 1991; Conner & Armitage, 1998; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Indeed, Conner and Armitage (1998) suggest that beliefs may be a stronger predictor of behavioral intentions than attitudes alone, as demonstrated by research suggesting that the best way to change behavior is to change the person's underlying beliefs.

Carsten et al. (2010) have argued that individuals with weaker coproduction beliefs endorse a role definition of followership involving obedience and deference because they perceive that leaders have more expertise and agency, and they trust that the leader knows the best course of action for the group. Individuals with stronger coproduction beliefs endorse a role definition that involves partnering with leaders to improve the overall functioning of the work unit; they believe followers play an integral role in the leadership process. Indeed, early validation work by Carsten and Uhl-Bien (2009) shows that followers with stronger coproduction

beliefs engage in voice and upward influence behavior and are undeterred by status and power differentials.

These findings have implications for ethical behavior in organizations. In particular, they suggest that followers who maintain weaker coproduction of leadership beliefs are likely to engage in crimes of obedience because they believe the follower role is best served by following a leader's directives without question. On the other hand, followers who have stronger coproduction beliefs may constructively challenge their leaders when faced with an unethical directive. Such individuals see followers as active participants in the leadership process and are more likely to challenge requests they perceive as potentially damaging to the organization.

We also expect that followers' coproduction beliefs are indirectly related to these outcomes through displacement of responsibility. For example, because followers with weaker coproduction beliefs strongly endorse the legitimacy of authority (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2009), we hypothesize they are likely to displace responsibility onto their leaders for unethical conduct, and subsequently place themselves in a "one-down position" (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Ravlin & Thomas, 2005). These followers may disengage and subsequently obey the unethical request because they believe they are less knowledgeable and less agentic than their leaders (Bandura, 1999). For those with stronger coproduction beliefs, who reject blind obedience (opting instead for a more collaborative role in the leadership process), we hypothesize they will engage in less displacement of responsibility and show a propensity to directly object to their leader's unethical request through constructive resistance.

> *Hypothesis 3a*: Belief in the coproduction of leadership is negatively associated with intention to obey and positively associated with intention to constructively resist a leader's unethical request.
>
> *Hypothesis 3b*: The relationship between belief in the coproduction of leadership and intentions to obey or constructively resist a leader's unethical request is mediated by displacement of responsibility.

Romance of Leadership

In addition to beliefs about followership, we expect that followers' beliefs about the romance of leadership will predict their intention to obey or constructively resist a leader's unethical request. Meindl et al. (1985) showed that followers maintain beliefs about the importance of leadership relative to other contextual factors in predicting the ultimate success or failure of an organization. Followers who romanticize leaders have an inflated view of a leader's importance in affecting organizational outcomes (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987), are more likely to perceive leaders as transformational and charismatic (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999), and have a tendency to attribute success or failure to a leader's level of knowledge and effectiveness (Konst, Vonk, & Van Der Vlist, 1999; Weber, Rottenstreich, Camerer, & Kenz, 2001) rather than other factors involved in producing an organizational outcome. Those who romanticize leaders often downplay contextual factors, such as the effort or expertise of subordinates, in explaining why organizations succeed or fail (see Bligh & Schyns, 2007, for a review).

Although research has not directly linked the romance of leadership to crimes of obedience, Hinrichs (2007) developed a theoretical model wherein he proposed that individuals who romanticize leaders are likely to obey unethical directives. Hinrichs (2007) argued that followers who romanticize leaders perceive the leader as all-powerful and therefore defer judgment to their leader. They believe the organization is better served by following a leader's request rather than relying on their own judgment.

In the present study, we expect that the romance of leadership will interact with coproduction beliefs to predict displacement of responsibility. Specifically, we hypothesize that individuals with weaker coproduction beliefs are likely to displace responsibility regardless of whether followers romanticize their leaders, whereas individuals with a stronger coproduction belief who romanticize leaders are likely to show greater levels of displacement of responsibility than those who do not romanticize leaders. This prediction is in line with research showing that individuals with a romanticized view of leadership see leaders as having greater importance, accountability, and responsibility for organizational processes and procedures (Meindl et al., 1985). Under situations where the leader has asked the follower to engage in unethical conduct, we expect those who romanticize leaders to show a propensity to displace responsibility, because they believe it is the leader who is ultimately responsible for organizational outcomes. Thus, we hypothesize that less displacement of responsibility occurs among followers with stronger coproduction beliefs who do not romanticize leadership.

> *Hypothesis 4*: Romance of leadership moderates the relationship between coproduction of leadership beliefs and displacement of responsibility such that followers with stronger coproduction beliefs who do not romanticize leaders are less likely to displace responsibility than any other group.

Method
Pilot Study

Prior to testing the hypothesized model, a pilot study was conducted with undergraduate business students at a university in the Southeastern United States. The purpose of the pilot study was to ensure that the scenario used to convey the unethical situation was believable and understandable (see Alexander & Becker, 1978). Additionally, we

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Alpha Reliabilities, and Intercorrelations for Pilot Study

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.54	.49	—						
2. Age	21.59	3.7	−.09	—					
3. Employed	1.36	.48	−.02	−.01	—				
4. Coproduction of Leadership	4.07	.57	.01	−.01	−.07	**.76**			
5. RLS	3.88	.59	−.06	.01	.18*	.23*	**.79**		
6. Obedience	2.13	.99	−.09	−.09	.10	−.25*	.04	—	
7. Constructive Resistance	4.12	.57	.01	.06	.01	.25**	.05	−.43**	**.84**

Note. $N = 149$. RLS = Romance of Leadership Scale. Cronbach's alpha reliability presented on the diagonal. Gender coded 1 = Male and 2 = Female. Employed coded 1 = Yes and 2 = No.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

wanted to assess whether enough variance was generated on the outcome measures to test the full hypothesized model. Participants in the pilot study included 149 students enrolled in an introductory management course. Respondents were 54% female with an average age of 22 years. Approximately 54% of these students indicated they were working, and 20% were working full time.

Data were collected from students over two separate time periods. At Time 1, a research assistant visited each class and asked students for assistance in completing a personality and beliefs survey for a class project. Measures collected at Time 1 included coproduction of leadership beliefs, romance of leadership, and demographics. At Time 2, approximately 5 weeks later, the principal investigator visited the same classes and asked students to participate in a study on leadership and ethics. The Time 2 survey included a scenario detailing the unethical situation and a series of questions asking whether the participant intended to obey or disobey the manager's request.

The scenario, originally published by Weber (1991), depicted a situation where an employee at an automotive company was asked to investigate an operating problem on one of the company's new luxury automobiles. Soon after beginning the investigation, the employee's manager approached and asked the employee to fabricate the data and change the findings of the study.

Weber's original scenario was modified slightly for this study. First, the name of the employee was changed to a gender neutral name and the scenario was revised to ensure that the manager's request to fabricate data was clear to participants. Students were asked to put themselves in the position of the employee and indicate their intention to obey or disobey the manager's request. Students were then asked a single question regarding their intent to obey the manager's request, as well as a series of questions regarding whether they would directly challenge their manager using constructive resistance strategies (see scale information below).

Results from the pilot study indicated the scenario was believable. More than 94% of the respondents indicated

Table 2. Regression Analysis for Pilot Study

	Beta	R^2	ΔR^2	F
Model predicting Obedience				
Step 1		.02	.02	.90
Age	.04			
Gender	−.12			
Employed	−.08			
Step 2		.08	.06	3.17*
Coproduction beliefs	−.21*			
RLS	.13			
Model predicting Constructive Resistance				
Step 1		.01	.01	.17
Age	.09			
Gender	.01			
Employed	.01			
Step 2		.08	.07	3.87*
Coproduction beliefs	.23*			
RLS	−.07			

Note. $N = 149$. RLS = Romance of Leadership Scale. Betas reported from final model. Codes: 1 = Male and 2 = Female, 1 = Employed and 2 = Unemployed.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

they believed a situation such as this happens in the workplace. In addition, data from the pilot study showed variance in both the single obedience item as well as the measures of constructive resistance (see means, standard deviations, alpha reliabilities, and intercorrelations in Table 1). The results of the pilot study also provided evidence that students' coproduction of leadership beliefs, as measured at Time 1, predicted their intention to obey or resist the unethical requests of a leader at Time 2 (see Table 2). Specifically, students with stronger coproduction beliefs were less likely to obey, ($\Delta R^2 = .06$, $F = 3.17$, $p < .05$) more likely to constructively resist the unethical requests of a leader ($\Delta R^2 = .07$, $F = 3.87$, $p < .05$). Having found that the scenario was believable, and produced sufficient variance in the outcome

measures, the full theoretical model was tested with a sample of working adults throughout the United States.

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from working adults who had voluntarily enrolled in Zoomerang's online research panel. Zoomerang compiles a panel of adults who are interested in participating in social science and marketing research. The surveys were conducted online, and all participants were guaranteed anonymity. Two-hundred and twenty-five working adults were asked to complete the first of two surveys designed to test the theoretical model shown in Figure 1. The Time 1 survey assessed employees' belief in the coproduction of leadership, their belief in the romance of leadership, their propensity to displace responsibility, and their demographic characteristics. The Time 2 survey, collected approximately 4 weeks later, included the scenario, as well as questions gauging whether participants intended to obey or constructively resist the leader's unethical request. Of those contacted, 161 participants responded to both surveys and were included in the final data set (response rate = 72%). The sample was primarily male (48% female, 52% male), with an average age of 39 years ($SD = 8.3$) and an average tenure in their current organization of 11 years ($SD = 12$). The majority of the respondents (72%) identified themselves as entry-level/front-line employees, 6% said they were first-line supervisors, and 17% identified themselves as middle managers.

Measures

Follower Belief in the Co-production of Leadership was measured with Carsten and Uhl-Bien's (2009) 5-item measure ($\alpha = .74$). This measure asks participants to think about their beliefs regarding the role of followers in relation to leaders in organizations and respond to each item using a 6-point strongly disagree–strongly agree response scale. The 5-point scale is commonly used in belief research (Anderson, 1995; Dweck, 1996), because beliefs are assumed to be robust and stable, thus eliminating the need for a "neutral" scale midpoint. A sample item is, "As part of their role, followers must be willing to challenge superiors' assumptions." In previous studies, this scale has shown good reliability (ranging from .73 to .84) as well as construct and predictive validity (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2009).

Romance of Leadership was measured with Meindl's (1998) 6-item Romance of Leadership Scale (RLS; $\alpha = .77$). A sample item from this scale is, "When it comes right down to it, the quality of leadership is the single most important influence on the functioning of an organization." With the exception of the coproduction of leadership scale described above, all other measures, including the RLS, were collected using a 5-point response scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Displacement of Responsibility was measured with Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli's (1996) 4-item measure, which is part of the moral disengagement scale ($\alpha = .81$). The scale asks about general propensity to displace responsibility and is not situation specific. A sample item from this scale is, "If people are not disciplined then they cannot be blamed for misbehaving." Previous research has found the scale to have good reliability and validity.

Intention to Obey the Leader's Unethical Request was measured with one item written specifically for this study. Participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "I would obey my manager's request." Research on single-item measures compared with measures of the same construct using multiple items shows that, depending on the issue being addressed, a single-item can provide equally valid ratings (Gardner, Cummings, Dunham, & Pierce, 1998; Loo, 2002; Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997). Specifically, "If the construct being measured is sufficiently narrow or is unambiguous to the respondent, a single item may suffice" (Sackett & Larson, 1990, p. 247). In this case, the construct meets those criteria in that it is a straightforward assessment of whether an individual would obey the manager's request.

Constructive Resistance was assessed with Tepper et al.'s (2001) 4-item measure of resistance to downward influence attempts ($\alpha = .72$). Participants were asked whether they would engage in each of the behaviors if they were in the actor's position. A sample item from this scale is, "I would present a logical reason for taking a different approach to the problem."

Social Desirability was measured with Paulhus's (1991) 18-item scale. According to Randall and Fernandes (1991), studies that ask participants to place themselves in ethical dilemmas should include some measure of impression management. Paulhus's (1991) measure assesses the tendency to manage impressions by asking participants a series of statements about their own behavior. A sample item from this is scale is, "I have said something bad about a friend behind his or her back."

Results

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations for all study variables are shown in Table 3. To test the model depicted in Figure 1, separate regression analyses were conducted for each hypothesis, controlling for social desirability and demographic variables thought to influence an individual's intention to engage in unethical behavior. For example, research has shown that gender (Arlow, 1991) and rank in the organization (Barnett & Karson, 1989) are both associated with intent to engage in unethical behavior.

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, Alpha Reliabilities, and Intercorrelations (Field Study)

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.48	.50	—							
2. Age	39.5	8.3	.05	—						
3. Social desirability	2.66	.68	−.02	.18*	**.70**					
4. Coproduction belief	4.18	.69	−.01	.12	.05	**.74**				
5. RLS	3.81	.56	.04	.03	.12	.16*	**.77**			
6. Displacement of Responsibility	2.23	.77	−.16*	−.12	.03	−.45†	−.03	**.81**		
7. Obedience	2.30	1.04	−.07	−.23†	.13	−.35†	−.13	.47†	—	
8. Constructive Resistance	3.89	.59	.08	.04	.12	.33†	.26†	−.21†	−.38†	**.72**

Note. N =161. RLS = Romance of Leadership Scale. Cronbach's alpha reliability presented on the diagonal. Gender coded 1 = Male and 2 = Female.
*$p < .05$. †$p < .01$.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted that an individual's propensity to displace responsibility at Time 1 would be associated with their intention to obey (Hypothesis 1) or constructively resist (Hypothesis 2) a manager's unethical request at Time 2. The results supported Hypotheses 1 and 2 (see Table 4). Specifically, after controlling for social desirability, gender, and rank in the organization, those who displaced responsibility were more likely to obey ($\Delta R^2 = .11$, $F = 23.07$, $p < .01$) and less likely to constructively resist ($\Delta R^2 = .04$, $F = 4.31$, $p < .05$) a leader's unethical request.

Hypothesis 3a predicted a direct relationship between belief in the coproduction of leadership and intent to obey or constructively resist a leader's unethical request; Hypothesis 3b predicted that displacement of responsibility mediates these relationships. The findings showed a direct effect between coproduction of leadership beliefs and both obedience ($\Delta R^2 = .10$, $F = 19.06$, $p < .01$) and constructive resistance ($\Delta R^2 = .19$, $F = 14.89$, $p < .01$), indicating support for Hypothesis 3a (see Table 5).

For Hypothesis 3b, mediation was assessed using Preacher and Hayes (2004) application of the Sobel (1982) test with bootstrapping. Preacher and Hayes (2004) showed that the Baron and Kenny (1986) method does not allow for testing the significance of the indirect effect in mediation models. As an alternative to hand calculating the Sobel test, they provided instructions and SPSS macros to test for mediation using the steps outlined by Baron and Kenny, and in addition they provided a direct test of the null hypothesis that the difference between "c" and "c′" is zero. This method also offers bootstrapping results, which are important to report when testing mediation hypotheses on small samples that may violate the assumption of normality for total and specific indirect effects (Shrout & Bolger, 2002).

The results of this analysis showed that displacement of responsibility mediated the relationship between beliefs in the coproduction of leadership and intention to obey a leader's unethical request ($Z = −3.84$, $p < .01$). However, no support was found for an indirect effect of coproduction

Table 4. Regression Analyses for Displacement of Responsibility Predicting Obedience and Constructive Resistance (Field Study)

	Beta	R^2	ΔR^2	ΔF
Hypothesis 1: Model predicting Obedience to Authority				
Step 1		.13	.13	4.74**
Gender	.01			
Rank				
Entry level	.43**			
Supervisor	.32**			
Middle manager	.32**			
Social desirability	.17			
Step 2		.24	.11	23.07**
Displacement of responsibility	.35**			
Hypothesis 2: Model predicting Constructive Resistance				
Step 1		.04	.04	1.27
Gender	.07			
Rank				
Entry level	−.23*			
Supervisor	−.12			
Middle manager	−.07			
Social desirability	.10			
Step 2		.08	.04	4.31*
Displacement of responsibility	−.17*			

Note. N = 161. Betas reported from final model. Gender coded 1 = Male and 2 = Female. Comparison group for dummy variables = director/executive.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

beliefs on intentions to use constructive resistance. Thus, the results suggest that Hypothesis 3b was supported for obedience, but not for constructive resistance (see Table 6).

The final hypothesis predicted that the relationship between belief in the coproduction of leadership and displacement of responsibility is moderated by an individual's belief in the romance of leadership (see Table 7). The results support the

Table 5. Regression Analyses for Coproduction of Leadership Predicting Obedience and Constructive Resistance (Field Study)

	Beta	R^2	ΔR^2	ΔF
Hypothesis 3a: Model Predicting Obedience to Authority				
Step 1		.13	.13	4.74**
Gender	−.06			
Rank				
Entry level	.27*			
Supervisor	.26*			
Middle manager	.27*			
Social desirability	.18			
Step 2		.23	.10	19.06**
Coproduction beliefs	−.33**			
Hypothesis 3a: Model predicting Constructive Resistance				
Step 1		.04	.04	1.27
Gender	.09			
Rank				
Entry level	−.11			
Supervisor	−.06			
Middle manager	−.01			
Social desirability	.10			
Step 2		.13	.09	14.89**
Coproduction beliefs	.30**			

Note. N = 161. Betas reported from final model. Gender coded 1 = Male and 2 = Female. Comparison group for dummy variables = director/executive.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 6. Indirect Effects of Coproduction Beliefs on Reactions to Unethical Requests Through Displacement of Responsibility (Field Study)

				Bootstrapping, Percentile 95% CI	
Dependent Variable	Effect	*SE*	*z*	Lower	Upper
Obedience	−.29	.07	−3.84**	−.46	−.13
Constructive Resistance	.01	.04	.34	−.06	.12

Note. CI = confidence interval. *N* = 161. 1,000 bootstrap samples.
**p < .01.

Table 7. Moderation Analysis With Coproduction of Leadership Beliefs and RLS Predicting Displacement of Responsibility (Field Study)

Variables Entered at Each Step	Beta	R^2	ΔR^2	*F*
Step 1		.01	.01	.09
Social desirability	.07			
Step 2		.13	.13	11.95*
Coproduction of leadership	−.34**			
RLS	.12			
Step 3		.15	.02	3.99*
Coproduction × RLS	.16*			

Note. N = 161. RLS = Romance of Leadership Scale. Betas reported from final model.
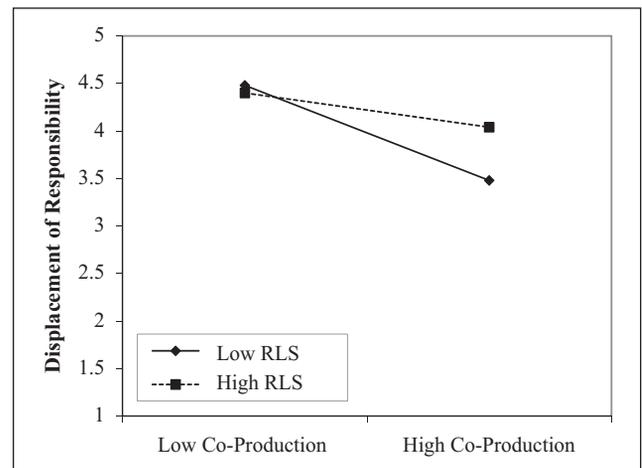**p < .05. **p < .01.*

Figure 2. Interaction plot of coproduction beliefs and RLS on displacement of responsibility

and displacement was stronger for individuals scoring high on the romance of leadership, whereas individuals with weaker coproduction beliefs were found to engage in displacement of responsibility regardless of their belief in the romance of leadership (see Figure 2). Thus, support was found for Hypothesis 4.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate issues of "ethical followership" by examining the antecedents of disobedience in an unethical situation. Specifically, personal characteristics such as followers' belief in the coproduction of leadership and the romance of leadership were examined to predict whether followers choose to obey or resist a leader's unethical request.

The results of this study show that followers with weaker coproduction beliefs are more likely to engage in crimes of obedience by complying with a leader's unethical directive,

hypothesis. Individuals with stronger coproduction beliefs, who romanticize leaders, are more likely to displace responsibility than individuals with stronger coproduction beliefs who do not romanticize leaders ($\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F = 3.99$, $p < .05$). Indeed, the results from a simple slopes analysis indicate that the relation between coproduction beliefs and displacement of responsibility was significant for followers scoring high, $t(161) = 1.98$, $p < .05$, and low, $t(161) = −2.77$, $p < .01$, on the romance of leadership. The relationship between coproduction beliefs

whereas followers with stronger coproduction beliefs are less likely to do so. Furthermore, the relationship between coproduction beliefs and obedience appears to manifest through displacement of responsibility. This mediating effect suggests that individuals with weaker coproduction beliefs are likely to obey a leader's unethical directive because they displace responsibility onto the leader. Followers with stronger coproduction beliefs, on the other hand, were only found to displace responsibility when they had a stronger belief in romance of leadership. That is, romance of leadership moderated the relationship between coproduction of leadership and displacement of responsibility. Thus, it appears that individuals with stronger coproduction beliefs, who fail to romanticize leaders, show the lowest levels of displacement of responsibility and are least likely to obey a leader's unethical request.

The findings regarding constructive resistance are a bit more nuanced. The regression results show main effects between coproduction beliefs and constructive resistance, as well as displacement of responsibility and constructive resistance. But, contrary to the hypothesis, displacement of responsibility did not mediate the relationship between coproduction beliefs and constructive resistance. This indicates that displacement of responsibility does not explain the association between coproduction beliefs and constructive resistance and suggests there may be another mechanism through which coproduction beliefs are related to a follower's decision to resist a leader's request.

According to the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen, 1991), an individual's beliefs and attitudes interact with context to influence behavior. Indeed, the followers interviewed by Carsten et al. (2010) spoke candidly about the effects of leadership styles and organizational climates (e.g., authoritarian or empowering) on their ability to act on their beliefs: Strong bureaucracy diminished followers' ability to take initiative and move things forward. Applied to this study, strong bureaucracy may make it hard to constructively resist, even though followers do not displace responsibility. In other words, maintaining a sense of personal responsibility may not be sufficient to allow followers to constructively resist—they may also need to believe the context will allow them to act on their beliefs and their feelings of responsibility.

A fruitful area for future research is examination of the contextual factors associated with a follower's belief that he/she can successfully resist an unethical request from a leader. These factors will likely be associated with a follower's sense of power to act. For example, rather than displacement of responsibility, future research may consider mediators such as relationship quality with the leader (e.g., leader–member exchange), association power (e.g., relationships with powerful others who can provide backup to the follower), and sense of dependency on the organization (e.g., ability to find another job). Research could also consider

ethical climates from the standpoint of followership, specifically, whether the follower perceives the organization values an ethical climate to the extent that it will support an individual's efforts to constructively resist a leader's unethical request. Another issue to examine involves the "followership climate" in terms of the number of followers (and leaders) holding stronger or weaker coproduction beliefs. Climates associated with stronger coproduction beliefs (among followers and leaders) are more likely to be associated with ethical followership than climates associated with weaker coproduction beliefs.

Our findings also have important theoretical implications. The results shown here are interesting in that they are in line with emerging research on followership showing that individuals with stronger coproduction beliefs are more likely to speak up with ideas or solutions to problems (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, in press) and that individuals with weaker coproduction beliefs show a stronger belief in legitimacy of authority (Carsten et al., 2010; Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2009). The results also support and extend previous research on the relationship between legitimacy of authority and obedience (Blass, 2009; Milgram, 1974) by showing that followers' beliefs about their role (as opposed to the leader's role) can predict their response to unethical situations and that displacement of responsibility is a necessary precursor for obedience (Rost, 1979; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Moreover, the results are consistent with findings regarding the romance of leadership. For example, individuals who score high on the romance of leadership perceive that leaders are extremely important in determining organizational outcomes (Meindl, 1990; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl et al., 1985). This heightened perception of a leader's importance may affect the decision that followers make about who is ultimately responsible for the ethical conduct of an organization. Indeed, our findings show that even though individuals may see followers as equal partners in the leadership process (i.e., they have stronger beliefs in the coproduction of leadership), they may still overly attribute a leader's importance in determining ethical conduct, largely believing that the leader, rather than followers, is responsible for setting and maintaining the ethical tone.

Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution until they have been replicated in a variety of settings and with multiple methodologies. For example, our research is nonexperimental, which limits our ability to draw conclusions about causation. Furthermore, our research can only draw conclusions about one's behavioral intentions rather than their actual behavior in unethical situations. Future research may want to examine how followers actually react to the unethical demands of a superior either in a lab study

or by asking participants to describe unethical situations and how they responded.

In addition, future research may want to create a more balanced look at ethical followership by collecting perceptions of both leaders and followers. For example, it may be that followers see themselves as contributing to the ethical conduct of an organization, but leaders see these followers as detracting from the organizational mission or goals. Finally, because this study was conducted using a North American sample, these findings may not generalize across cultures. For example, differences in how followers perceive power distance or uncertainty avoidance across cultures may also influence their willingness to constructively challenge leaders in the face of an unethical request.

Conclusion

This study reveals the important, and often overlooked, role that followers play in the maintenance of ethical conduct in organizations. By establishing the important relationships between follower beliefs, displacement of responsibility, and obedience, we begin to understand the follower side of ethical leadership and appreciate the role that followers play in challenging their leaders to uphold ethical codes. Although this study is only the first step toward understanding the differences between ethical and unethical followership, it lays a foundation for future research to begin a more balanced appreciation of how both leaders and followers can work together to coproduce ethical outcomes in organizations.

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