Leader Self-Serving Behavior: Bad Apples Competing in a Bad Barrel

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serving behavior, their stories provided further insight into understanding the phenomenon and

will aid in the development of intervention strategies to protect others from sharing similar fates.

Abstract

Corporate environments are fiercely competitive ecosystems that are both fueled and plagued, at least in part, by an innate desire to promote personal gain (i.e., self-interest). While self-interest is not inherently negative, it has a way of tempting individuals to oblige their self-serving impulses with little to no consideration for how their actions might adversely impact another (Carlson et al., 2022). Depending on perspective, leader self-serving behavior might be attributed to a handful of so-called "bad apples," whose moral identities have been distorted by the dark tetrad. Conversely, the culprit could instead be a "bad barrel" that was created with good intention but spoiled by corruption. Nevertheless, leaders are faced with moral decisions found at the crossroads between logic and intuition, subjective and objective pressures, and the promotion of one's preferences against social norms (Trevino & Nelson, 2021). Corporate rewards systems emphasize results over execution, effectively ignoring the repercussions of self-serving behavior so long as productivity and performance are optimized (Piezunka et al., 2018; Treviño et al., 2014). Self-serving leaders who capitalize on the latter create an environment in which their subordinates likely feel stifled in terms of employee engagement and job satisfaction, culminating in the forms of voluntary resignation, retaliation, or perhaps worse (Northouse, 2021). The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the theories of egoism and moral development to expand upon what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement. This study focused on the lived experiences of nineteen participants who have or currently report to an individual or team who from their perspective has engaged in leader self-serving behavior. The four themes the emerged from the interview data included Character Flaws, Naturally Selfish, Situational Dependence, and Institutional Inefficiencies. The results suggested that the situational dependency of leader self-serving behavior stems from the institutional inefficiencies of organizations to tempt an individual's innate selfishness that is supported by their character flaws. Consequently, leader self-serving behavior tends to be organizationally-driven, but it is up to the individual to decide how they respond. On a positive note, the findings of this study identified several intervention strategies to mitigate leader self-serving behavior in the workplace.

Keywords: leader self-serving behavior, professional ethics, organizational behavior, self-interest, human behavior

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Chapter 1

The Problem and its Setting

Introduction

As children, we are taught to abide by the Golden Rule to foster benevolence as a sort of social practice in our society. Consequently, there is a general expectation that individuals are to act in good faith, although the reality is not always the case. These expectations are influenced and, in part, governed by the idea of a common morality. The *common morality* is the collection of moral norms that align virtuous people (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). While it may be a somewhat disorganized set of propositions not according to any particular method, it grounds many ethical theories (e.g., utilitarianism or Kantian ethics) as a basis for moral insights and standards of behavior. This common morality is the lifeblood of human existence as it creates an environment in which groups of people with differing worldviews can coexist. "Without a common morality, humans belong to groups whose relationships are vague, competitive, and even dangerous: trust is absent" (Stivers, 2023, p. viii). Daily, we are faced with moral conundrums in all aspects of life. Sometimes, we decide to pursue socially acceptable ends and on other occasions, we instead humor our innate desires that perhaps benefit only the self or a minority perspective. People are fallible beings influenced by visceral impulses (Scott, 2000). These impulses are found at the intersections of right versus wrong, good versus evil, and altruism versus egoism, although egoism is not intrinsically negative. That said, we are, for the most part, equally capable of engaging in both moral and immoral behavior.

Life is full of choices and while the following is inherently subjective, there are "good" choices and there are "bad" choices, depending on one's viewpoint. In any case, one's choices often determine the life one leads. Like choices, there are both "good" and "bad" people in this

world, however, individuals are capable of change and operating outside of their innate

"goodness" or innate "badness." Regardless of their actions, people tend to be pessimistic by

nature (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). In fact, Jordan (1965) suggests that "a positive attitude or

positive affect does not have an effect on measured behavior oppositely equivalent to the effect

of a negative attitude or negative affect" (p. 315). We seem to be hardwired to fixate on the

negative aspects of people and of everyday life. Perhaps this negativity bias one holds is nothing

more than a matter of projection, influenced by a diluted self-image (Baumeister et al., 1998). On

the other hand, the negativity experienced by one can sometimes be attributed to another's

overemphasis of the self. Unfortunately, many of us have been wronged in this life, especially in

the workplace. With that in mind, this study aimed to explore the current literature as it relates to

the potential causes of leader self-serving behavior.

Corporate environments are hyper-competitive ecosystems in which some individuals

strive to outdo their colleagues, sometimes by any means necessary, in order to get ahead. To

that end, certain career-driven individuals might feel inclined to partake in self-serving behavior

to progress. To some, there is nothing more important than upward mobility, or the opportunity

to advance one's career. Presumably, the individuals who can relate to the latter might find their

career at the core of their identities because perhaps they have no other passions or interests to

offset their professional pursuits.

At times, unfortunately, impulse and desire can trump morality as human beings are

plagued by many stimuli that require varying degrees of attention. Because people are constantly

evolving, the world is composed of *good* people who do *bad* things, as well as *bad* people who

do *good* things. Depending on the individual, one might spare no expense to obtain what is

required, irrespective of how one's corresponding actions might negatively affect another.

Theoretically, then, self-serving behavior would be supplemented by one's self-serving bias. According to Heider (1958), *self-serving bias* leads individuals to revel in their success and attribute positive outcomes to their competency, whereas their failures are the result of external forces outside of their control. The researcher posits self-serving bias as a catalyst for leader self-serving behavior in the workplace to supplement individual career development.

Leaders, who are not only pressured to perform, but to also promote organizational efficiencies and effectiveness, while leading teams of people, are not excluded from the list of those allured by one or all the cardinal sins. Disregarding the pervasive prevalence of cancel culture, a leader's self-serving behavior, fueled by an unrestrained ambition, can remain undetected, concealed by productivity, performance, and positive impacts to an organization's financial metrics. "Of all the causes which conspire to blind man's erring judgment, and misguide the mind, what the weak head with strongest bias rules, is pride, the never-failing vice of fools" (Pope, 1716, p. 13). To that end, the researcher presumes that leaders who are intently motivated to grow professionally (i.e., career advancement) may possess a deep-seated proclivity to engage in self-serving behavior. Is it a character trait, one's response to the competitive nature of the system in which one operates, or is it something completely different? For this demographic, their career may be at the center of their identity or perhaps their sole priority. To that end, one might suppose that certain leaders would stop at nothing to achieve whatever they perceive to be rightfully theirs. Thus, the goal of this study was to consider the likely causes of leader self-serving behavior from multiple perspectives. Moreover, the researcher aimed to develop potential strategies to thwart leader self-serving behavior, even incrementally or on a small scale, to promote a common morality and acts of genuine benevolence not only in corporate settings but among the masses.

While advantageous for the individual, leader self-serving behavior can be a detriment to the interpersonal leader-employee relationship, as well as a deterrent to organizational cohesion and success (Wisse et al., 2019). Like any meaningful relationship, the one between a leader and their subordinates is built upon a foundation of mutual trust, among other things. Trust, or lack thereof, can develop or lead to the demise of any relationship (Simpson, 2007). Kramer and Carnevale (2001) suggest that the very trust of which we speak may have an impact on a leader's individual interests. Consequently, it is imperative for leaders to gain the trust of their followers to the point in which they believe that the actions of their leaders are always in good faith and with their followers' best interests in mind. Furthermore, it is of paramount importance that an unwavering trust is formed, especially from the perspective of the leader, because without the help of their employees, leaders may fail to deliver, impeding their subsequent success. Success, in this case, refers to the leader's ability to progress within their organization in support of their individual career advancement.

Recalling our discussion of negativity bias, one can presume that there are instances in which a leader's effort(s) to foster trust between their people and themself is an act of self-serving behavior. Efforts to mitigate masquerades of deceit (i.e., a leader's manipulation of their employees' emotions) may be, in part, supplemented by one's feelings of empathy as they relate to altruistic intentions and the promotion of a common good. *Empathy*, in this case, is defined as one's ability to perceive the emotional stimuli and triggers of not only oneself but also of another (Keen, 2007). Stadler (2017) confirms that empathy is not exactly an emotion, while Nussbaum (2003) discusses its role in the development of an individual's moral identity. Our moral identity serves as our North Star which guides us through life and affords us the ability to navigate

through internal struggles related to moral dilemmas, especially those in which one's decision(s) directly impacts the lives of others.

Theoretical Framework

Presumably, many leaders engage in self-interested – or worse – self-serving behavior to promote personal and/or professional growth. In essence, self-interest is not in and of itself inherently negative. *Self-interest* refers to the promotion of one's well-being, which according to Miller (1999) poses as a distinct influence on how someone might act or approach situations. While self-interest is not innately "bad," within the confines of this qualitative study, it is to be considered one of the driving forces of one's indulgence of self-serving behavior. The latter is not to satisfy a life sustaining activity, like eating food, drinking water, or seeking shelter; but rather, to exploit the good nature of another human being for personal gain. It supports one's desire to succeed at all costs, devoid of little to no consideration for how one's decisions or actions might negatively impact another. This behavior is immoral and should be mitigated as much as possible. After all, landing a big promotion with the corner office should not come at the expense of another person's well-being. For that reason, this study aimed to link innate self-serving internalizations (i.e., the behaviors a "bad apple" might exhibit) with the tangible outcomes we see in daily life, but more specifically, within the workplace.

Central to this study is the ethical theory of egoism as it relates to the study of human behavior and the creation of "bad apples" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Guiding Principles of Egoism

Egoism			
Descriptive			Normative
Psychological: claims that each person has but one ultimate aim: her own welfare		Rational: claims that it is necessary and sufficient for an action to be rational that it maximizes one's self-interest	Ethical: claims that it is necessary and sufficient for an action to be morally right that it maximizes one's self-interest
Subjective/objective			
Subjective: claims that self-interest is what one desires	Objective: Claims that self-interest is one's possession of states independently of desire		

Note: Cited from (Debeljak & Krkač, 2008).

 Egoism is an ethical theory concerned with rationalizing and describing the motivation behind one's actions, especially those that are ascribed to the self (Hills, 2010). It is the antithesis of altruism, which describes behavior that disregards the self to serve another (Mangone, 2020). Egoism served as a foundational reference point to the motivations behind a leader's decision(s) to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career development.

 As shown in Figure 1, *psychological egoism* is a descriptive theory with both objective and subjective interpretations, which asserts that human behavior is driven by self-interest (Debeljak & Krkač, 2008; Sober, 2013). A *descriptive theory* presents ethical claims via descriptions of reality, while *normative theories* make claims based on how one should act in terms of what might be deemed moral behavior (Kagan, 2018). Aside from its normative counterpart, ethical egoism, psychological egoism focuses on the motivations behind one's self-interested behavior (Gert, 1965). Similar to psychological egoism, *rational egoism* is a

descriptive theory and "virtue-based set of ethical beliefs" which contends that it is appropriate

for one to promote one's welfare if the behavior is reasonable and promotes one's self-interest

(Overall & Gedeon, 2022, para. 10). Essentially, rational egoism justifies selfishness, so long as

the latter improves one's overall wellbeing. An ethical egoist would argue that "the sole ethical

criterion is self-interest; that is, it is man's ethical duty to maximize his own benefits in any

given situation" (Sharaf & Eslami Ardakani, 2015, p. 31). In this study, the theory of egoism, in

its many forms, aided the researcher in understanding the "why" behind a leader's decision to

oblige their self-serving impulses.

As self-interest is sometimes considered synonymous with selfishness, is it practical to

question if self-interested behavior is devoid of integrity? "To have integrity is to view some

actions as morally disagreeable from their consequences and to reflect that view in one's actions

and sentiments" (Calhoun, 1995, p. 247). Is one's behavior justifiable, within reason, if the

outcome supersedes the seemingly unethical act? Coupling with the theory of egoism and an

individual's drive to self-serve, the researcher drew from Kish-Gephart et al.'s (2010) "meta-

analytic framework for antecedents of unethical choices in the workplace" (p. 3) as a

foundational reference to guide this study (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Influences of Leader Self-Serving Behavior in the Workplace

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

(PSYCHOLOGICAL)   (DEMOGRAPHIC)

- Cognitive moral   • Gender
  development   • Age
- Idealism   • Education level
- Relativism
- Machiavellianism
- Locus of control
- Job satisfaction

MORAL ISSUE CHARACTERISTICS

- Concentration of effect
- Magnitude of consequences
- Probability of effect
- Proximity
- Social consensus
- Temporal immediacy
- General moral intensity

ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT CHARACTERISTICS

- Egoistic ethical climate
- Benevolent ethical climate
- Principled ethical climate
- Ethical culture
- Code of conduct
- Code enforcement

UNETHICAL CHOICE

- Intention
- Behavior

Note: Cited from (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010).

Leveraging some of the concepts found in Figure 2, the researcher aimed to expand upon moral development, the dark tetrad, organizational culture, and corporate rewards systems in terms of how each concept influences leader self-serving behavior. Thus, adding further insight to the bad apple versus bad barrel debate. Along with egoism, the dark tetrad and moral development served as influences of leader self-behavior relative to the individual (i.e., bad apple) and supported the researcher's exploration of the possible ethical and moral justifications of leader self-serving behavior. Organizational culture and corporate rewards systems (i.e., bad barrel) served as extrinsic motivators of leader self-serving behavior.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, *self-serving leaders* are "bad apples" who put the needs of themselves before those of their organizations, colleagues, and employees, respectively. This type of behavior is perhaps the result of one's distorted sense of morality as it relates to one's desire to promote one's interests, but it could also be argued that these so-called "bad apples" have been soured by the corruption of a seemingly "bad barrel." Expanding upon the bad apple versus bad barrel debate, the researcher considered the influences of leader self-serving behavior in the workplace from two main perspectives: the individual (i.e., leader) and the environment (i.e., organizational culture). Figure 3 illustrates the researcher's adaptation of Kish-Gephart et al.'s (2010) meta-analytic framework to conceptualize the proposed influences of leader self-serving behavior.

Figure 3

Potential Causes of Leader Self-Serving Behavior
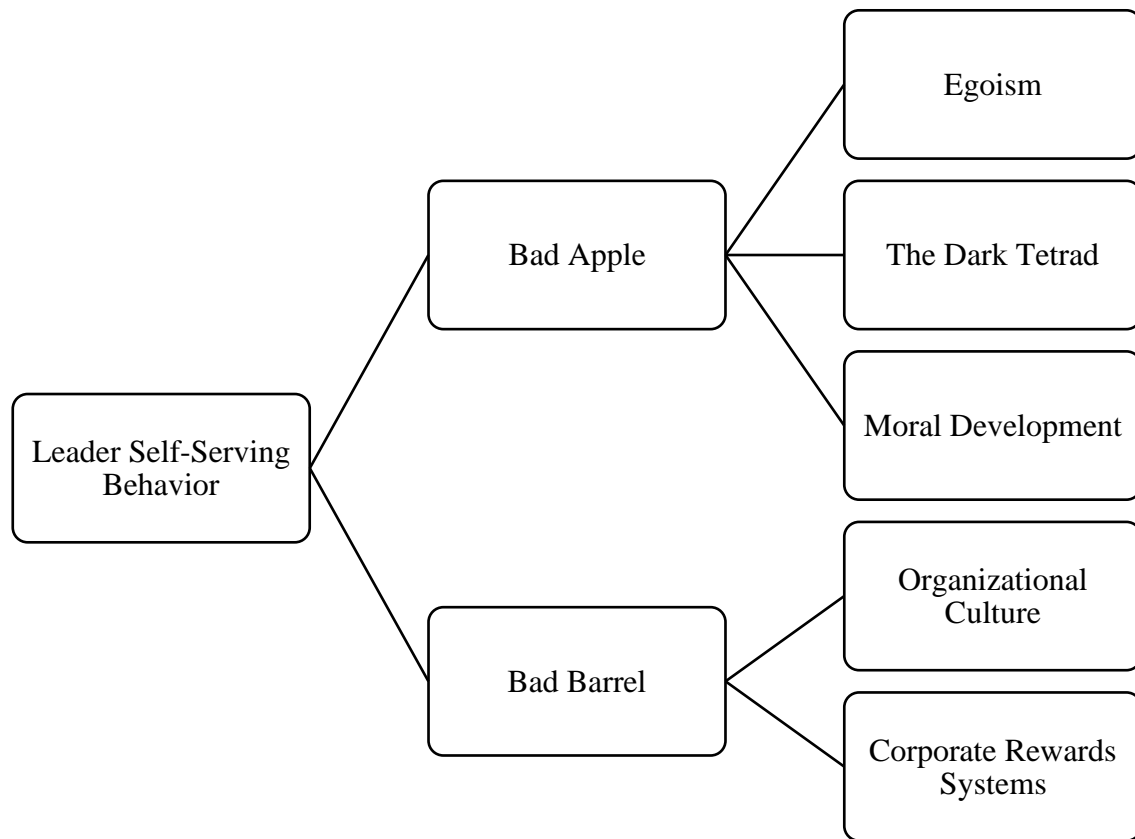
Note: Adapted from (Kish-Gephart, et al., 2010).

From the individual perspective, the researcher suggests that a leader's decision to engage in self-serving behavior is likely influenced, at least in part, by the dark tetrad, a lack of moral development, and their innate impulses to self-serve (i.e., egoism). The researcher explored each concept both independently and in conjunction to understand if the concepts are interrelated in terms of how they influence leader self-serving behavior. From the environmental perspective, the researcher presumes that a leader's decision to engage in self-serving behavior is influenced by the organizational culture of their employer, as well as the application of corporate rewards systems of these organizations. Similar to how the researcher attempted to understand

leader self-serving behavior from the perspective of the individual, they explored the influences of organizational culture and corporate rewards systems both separately and together. The prospect of earning additional income is awfully enticing and might lead some individuals to behave unethically to meet and exceed goals at all costs (Piezunka et al., 2018; Treviño et al., 2014). That said, Gürlek (2021) would suggest that the individual(s) should not be scapegoated as the sole bearer of blame as the way corporate rewards systems are structured has a way of tempting one's inner impulses to self-serve. Moreover, the researcher explored leader self-serving behavior from an institutional perspective, vis-à-vis the unexpected drawbacks of corporate rewards systems. Please see Chapter 2, Literature Review, for further discussion concerning this theory.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study, using a phenomenological approach, was to explore the theories of egoism and moral development, considering the influences of organizational culture and corporate rewards systems, to expand upon what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement. In the research, leader self-serving behavior is defined as a leader's indulgence of self-serving impulse to promote individual career advancement, in relation to how one ought act, as per society's view of a "common morality."

Central Question

What causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement in organizations?

Sub-questions

1.   What are the lived experiences of individuals who have directly reported to and/or worked with self-serving leaders?

2.   What internal factors (i.e., egoism, the dark tetrad, and/or moral development) may tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace?

3.   What external factors (i.e., organizational culture and/or corporate rewards systems) may tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace?

Definitions

"Bad Apple"

The term bad apple refers to "a few unsavory individuals" who engage in unethical behavior within the workplace (Treviño & Youngblood, 1990, p. 378; Simpson, 1987). In this study, "bad apples" are leaders who pursue self-serving or self-interested ends irrespective of how their actions might negatively affect their colleagues, subordinates, and/or the organizations for which they work, as a whole.

"Bad Barrel"

In some cases, organizations are plagued by flawed cultures, institutional inefficiencies, and the dark side of corporate rewards systems (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990). In this this study, the term "bad barrel" refers to organizations that have been corrupted by corporate greed and the creators of broken systems, which permit leader self-serving behavior.

Organizational Culture

The culture of an organization is a "system of shared values (that define what is important) and norms that define appropriate attitudes and behaviors for organizational members

(how to feel and behave)" (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996, p. 160). An organization's culture

governs the behaviors of those within it, thus influencing how its employees interact with not

only one another but also the customers and markets it serves (Graham et al., 2022). In this

study, organizational culture was explored in terms of how it supports the development of "bad

barrels" and influences leader self-serving behavior.

Corporate Rewards Systems

Corporate rewards systems are created and implemented to motivate employees to

produce desired outputs (Armstrong & Stephens, 2005). They fortify corporate culture in terms

of aligning an organization and its employees to work toward a shared mission and vision (Kerr

& Slocum, 2005). In this study, corporate rewards systems were explored in terms of how they

can promote unethical behavior if not properly maintained.

Leader

Business leaders are working professionals who "are responsible for the effectiveness of

organizations" (Bennis, 2009, p. 5). A professional is one who has acquired the relevant

knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to gain expertise in a particular discipline which can then

be leveraged for one's monetary gain (Wasserstrom, 1975). In this study, a leader was

considered anyone who has developed the necessary KSAs to lead a group of people in a

corporate work environment (i.e., the direct supervisor of the study's participants).

Self-Serving Behavior

Self-serving behavior refers to the promotion of one's interests and well-being, while

lacking consideration of how one's actions might affect others (Rus et al., 2010). In this study,

the researcher explored the concept of self-serving behavior as it relates to leadership and the

impact the latter has on the success of an organization and the lives of those impacted (i.e., the employees of self-serving leaders).

Lived Experiences

Lived experiences are those which human beings, who are sentient and self-aware (Moustakas, 1994), encounter that become "set within their personal, social, and historical context" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 73). In this study, the researcher called upon the participants to draw on their lived experiences to provide detail-rich descriptions of their encounters with the phenomenon.

Workplace

Synonymous with "company" or "organization," a workplace, whether onsite or virtual, is a place in which business is conducted (Schultz, 2002). In this study, the researcher focused on the interpersonal relations in white-collar workplaces (i.e., the quintessential corporate environment) in terms of what leads some to exploit others for personal gain.

Career Advancement

Career advancement is the biproduct of one's conscious and calculated efforts to develop one's career, which is often accompanied by a promotion, pay increase, etc. (Laud & Johnson, 2012). In this study, career advancement served as one of the justifications for why individuals engage in self-serving behavior.

Internal Factors

Internal factors refer to the intrinsic motivations that influence one's decision to engage in certain behaviors (e.g., leader self-serving behavior) (Renninger, 2000). In this study, the researcher considered a leader's motivations to engage in self-serving behavior relative to their

internal struggle to decipher the differences between right and wrong, good and bad, or perhaps even a lack of impulse control or complete disregard for the wellbeing of others.

Personal Life

One's personal life is a fluid and cumulative amalgam of lived experiences that shape one's personal identity; individual choice; one's family, work, social, and/or spiritual lives; cultural and/or class influences; and the like (Smart, 2007). The daily tens of thousands of decisions one makes, including how to promote and advance one's career directly impact one's personal life. In this study, the researcher considered one's desire to improve one's current situation, in terms of one's personal life, as something that might influence the average person to partake in self-serving behavior.

External Factors

External factors are extrinsic stimuli that influence an individual's current circumstances that are not necessarily considered or expected (Miller et al., 1981). In this study, coupled with intrinsic motivations, external factors, such as the threat of losing one's job, competition, inter-office politics, are expected to impact one's decisions to self-serve.

Success

Success is gained through the development of one's "accumulative advantage" (Gladwell, 2008, p. 30). In many ways, the definition of success is subjective and relative in terms of how one perceives it. In this study, success was considered in the traditional sense and from a professional development perspective (i.e., climbing the corporate latter, increasing wealth, improving one's socioeconomic status).

Status

Status determines how one ranks within society (Turner, 1988). Typically, status refers to the amount of prestige and/or admiration one has attained, especially that which is relative to one's in-group, as well as professional bodies and various social circles to which one may belong. In this study, the researcher presumed that a self-serving leader might be motivated by the desire to improve their status within their organization or society at large, which ultimately leads to their decision to engage in self-serving behavior (Grapsas et al., 2020).

Common Morality

The theory of common morality suggests that people who are concerned with behaving morally in their everyday lives align with a shared value system that distinguishes right from wrong (Beauchamp, 2003). In this study, the common morality refers to a universal code of conduct by which the majority of the world's population abides to coexist within a civilized society.

Delimitations

This phenomenological study was delimited to purposeful and snowball sampling, which drew on the lived experiences of the participants who were selected to interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It called upon individuals who held at least a high school diploma or equivalent with a minimum of one year's work experience and have worked with or directly reported to a leader that engaged in self-serving behavior. Individuals personally affected by the actions of self-serving leaders could speak about the impacts of this behavior and its potential influences (e.g., how an organization's culture and corporate rewards systems are structured). This work experience could have been from the private or public sector or any industry. Pinnegar and

Daynes (2007) assert that the aim of qualitative research is not the development of generalizable data, but rather, to illustrate the distinctions of the phenomenon in question.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that all respondents met the inclusion criteria. Second, the researcher assumed that all participants understood the purpose of the study and at least have a baseline understanding of the main topics to be discussed. Additionally, the researcher assumed that all participants answered interview questions to the best of their knowledge and in an honest manner (i.e., minimizing or mitigating their social desirability bias). It was the hope of the researcher that participants omitted the use of rhetoric to produce responses that accurately depicted and provided a clear representation of their sincere feelings and lived experiences with the phenomenon.

Significance of Study

Corporate environments have a way of tempting individuals to engage in seemingly immoral behavior to advance their careers (Gürlek, 2021). That said, it can be rather difficult to correctly distinguish between the behaviors in which a leader might engage to promote self-centered ends compared to those deemed other-centered. To date, it seems that much of the empirical data on and around the causes or influences of self-serving leadership, specifically as it relates to the bad apples vs. bad barrel debate, has been presented from a quantitative perspective. Studies have shown that the predictors of leader self-serving behavior are not wholly understood and like any enigma, require substantial empirical research (Barelds et al., 2018). In turn, Rus et al. (2012) suggests that if we were to further expand upon the current research to develop a more holistic understanding of the source of leader self-serving behavior, it may be possible to prevent it, now and in the future. Thus, the importance of this study and those like it,

as they provide further context and considerations to the study of professional ethics, organizational behavior, and leadership at large. In this study, theoretical assertions pertaining to the bad apples versus bad barrel debate were appraised through practical means. Employing a phenomenological approach, the researcher intended to harbor an environment that encouraged free thought, speech, and open communication to reveal unencumbered insight into the determinants of leader self-serving behavior.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Hoping to gain insight into the potential causes of leader self-serving behavior, this study was underpinned, at least in part, by theories and concepts found not only in business and professional ethics research but also that of social psychology. Ferrell and Fraedrich (2021) define *business ethics* as "organizational principles, values, and norms that may originate from individual, organizational statements, or from the legal system that primarily guide individual and group behavior in business" (p. 4). Business ethics refers to the acknowledgement of and adherence to a universal set of standards (i.e., code of conduct) that governs the world of business (Crane et al., 2019). Furthermore, business ethics could also be considered as a sort of rules of engagement, in terms of how professionals ought to conduct business, morally speaking. Conversely, Collins (1994) comments on the belief held by some that the term "business ethics" is nothing but a mere oxymoron, which is to say that most, if not all business activities are either unethical, immoral, or both. On the contrary, not all self-interested behavior is inherently malevolent (Mansbridge, 1990). In fact, some self-interested acts are done in the spirit of altruism (Schenk, 1987). Similarly, not all behavior in the workplace is self-serving or malign, thus not all businesspeople are criminals who act in such a way that are devoid of prior

consideration of the repercussions of their actions, at the very least. Nevertheless, "by understanding human behavior in an organizational context, we can better understand and manage our own and other's ethical conduct" (Trevino & Nelson, 2021, p. 19).

Smith (1863) likens self-interest to that of "self-love," which in modern day terms, is synonymous with that of selfishness. While acts of self-love may not always be at the expense of others, there are certainly instances in which individuals pursue their interests with little to no regard for how their actions might negatively impact another. In social contexts, *selfishness* applies to one's explicit concern with oneself and a blatant disregard of others (Caporael et al., 1989). Selfishness, in this study, was a precursor to self-serving behavior as those who act selfishly do so to promote personal gain with little to no consideration of how their actions may negatively impact another.

Competing Interests in Corporate Environments

People supplement their personal interests by way of benevolence or malevolence, depending on the individual or situation at hand (May, 2011). Sometimes, individuals are driven by the need to promote the welfare of others and in some cases it is in one's best interest to act with benevolent intention or in a way that benefits another (Kerr et al., 2004). Conversely, people can also be tempted by visceral impulses to engage in self-serving behavior, that if not swiftly quashed, may inevitably lead to undue harm. In essence, self-interest is not in and of itself inherently negative. On the contrary, self-interest refers to the promotion of one's well-being, which according to Miller (1999) poses as a distinct influence on how someone leads their life. Nevertheless, while self-interest is not the root of all evil, one might consider it as one of the driving forces of leader self-serving behavior.

Unlike the theory of psychological egoism, which suggests that people are simply driven by self-interest as an inherent human characteristic, ethical egoism claims that to act in one's self-interest is one's moral obligation to the self (Gert, 1998). At its core, *ethical egoism* contends that human beings should engage in prosocial behavior to encourage moral reciprocity, with the hope that doing so might lead to the promotion of the agent's personal interests (Shaver, 2002). Furthermore, agent-based virtue ethics maintains that one's motives determine whether one's actions are morally just (Slote, 2020). Motive, in this case, distinguishes between moral and immoral behavior. It aids one's discernment of prosocial versus antisocial behavior, which considers one's "intentions and motives, costs and benefits, and societal context" (Pfattheicher et al., 2022, p. 125). While it is difficult for self-serving leaders to engage in prosocial behavior, an ethical egoist would suggest that it would behoove them to enter into certain social contracts with "high value" individuals, whose support would only benefit them in the long term.

Altruistic Motivations

Although this study was motivated by the egoistic motivations of self-serving leaders, the researcher would be remiss to not at least acknowledge the antithesis of egoism (i.e., altruism). Social psychologists tend to agree that at the heart of *altruism* is selfless service (Batson, 2010; Pfattheicher et al., 2022; Sosik et al., 2009). To that end, *altruistic leaders* are those who engage in prosocial behavior that promotes the welfare of their employees and the organizations for which they work, devoid of any consideration of how the behavior might impact the actor (Avolio & Locke, 2002; Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996). As has and will be further discussed, the latter is the exact opposite of leader self-serving behavior. Instead, the self-serving leader would manipulate and exploit their employees, colleagues, and employers for their personal and professional gain.

Nevertheless, Sosik et al. (2009) raise an interesting point as they discuss the relationship between altruism and self-interest in terms of the social norm of reciprocity. Contemporary interpretations of reciprocity seem to agree that people often reciprocate as a sort of social expectation (norm) or moral obligation (Gouldner, 1960; Smith & Malinowski, 2018). On the contrary, classical philosophers from the Eastern and Western worlds had disagreed on the motives behind altruistic behavior. Sosik et al. (2009) states that Eastern philosophers aligned altruism with authentically benevolent behavior that positively impacts the life of another, whereas their Western counterparts believed that some acts of altruism were merely self-serving behavior in disguise (Clary & Snyder, 1999, Seyle, 1974, Stevens et al., 2005). As in, one might misappropriate the benefits of the "golden rule" as a way to indebt another under false pretenses. For instance, the latter could be a self-serving leader who leverages the communality of the human condition to strategically befriend those in higher places and the like to be used as means to their ends (Berscheid, 2003; Flynn, 2008; Perugini et al., 2003).

We tend to hold negative connotations when discussing actions of self-interest as we are quicker to believe that people's motivations are more selfish than utilitarian (Kelley & Stahelski, 1970). Oftentimes, though, individuals act on self-interest to better their lives, which is seemingly at no cost to anyone else. Both Miller (1999) and Clary and Snyder (1999) discuss acts of charitable giving, which is quite curious, as the so-called philanthropist's motives are not always clear, or for the sake of argument, entirely pure. For example, is it entirely altruistic for a large corporation to donate to charity or are there hidden agendas, as well? Donors might feel a sense of pride for doing a good deed, sure, but do these positive emotions supersede the monetary benefit one might receive in doing so? The Internal Revenue Service (2020) states that corporations and individuals alike can deduct up to 60% of their adjusted gross income upon the

submission of a charitable donation. In these cases, do motive and intent really matter?

Nevertheless, good is done. At the end of the day, the result is a win-win outcome: charities

allocate resources, donors receive tax benefits, among other things. How about after-school

programs that are developed to support underprivileged children in the pursuit of a better life? Is

it possible that their involvement is more so a means for organizations to garner a positive image

than to fulfill their corporate social responsibilities? Based on their findings, Miller (1999) would

likely find this to be true, as individuals are more often willing to aid in the betterment of society

if they receive something in return for their efforts.

Egoism

Human behavior is driven by self-interest albeit interests that are not necessarily in

support of the common good. Schön (1987) likens professional environments akin to that of a

swamp, to which many would likely attest. Due to the overly competitive and seemingly

cutthroat nature of corporate environments, one might presume that it is rather difficult for

leaders to align their allegiances to their employer and subordinates, both in practical and ethical

terms alike. In turn, competing interests between two or more individuals are likely to spark

interpersonal conflicts which, as Losada-Otalora et al. (2020) would likely suggest, can lead to

unethical behavior. The latter is especially true for individuals (i.e., leaders) who are egocentric

(De Clercq et al., 2022). While difficult, a leader's success is predicated on their understanding

of how best to exercise "professional judgment" (McDavid et al., 2018, p. 441).

   Psychological Egoism. Turner (1976) claims that humans are compelled by intrinsic

desires (i.e., self-interest). Again, the latter is not meant to suggest that self-interested behavior is

inherently negative because one might promote one's self-interest to serve another with

benevolent intentions. Granted, the goodwill may be manufactured or lacking sincerity, but the

recipient of the behavior would be none the wiser and nevertheless bear the benefits. As previously mentioned, leaders might befriend their superiors and/or subordinates to support their career advancement. Morally speaking, is that right or wrong? Those of us with a developed moral identity would likely conclude that the behavior is not morally justified because the career-driven leader is simply manipulating the emotions of those around them (i.e., obliging the dark side of emotional intelligence) (Grant, 2014).

From a psychological egoist's perspective, self-interest is the foremost motivation behind all human behavior (Miller, 1999). Presumably, it could be argued that self-interest is one of if not the sole contributor to the successful evolution of mankind. Without self-interest, would we think about taking care of ourselves in terms of eating food, drinking water, and seeking shelter or would we instead be driven by selfless acts of altruism that might inevitably lead us to our collective demise? The latter rhetorical question is of course an exaggeration, but the sentiment remains the same. Devoid of a looming self-interest, one might assume that we, as a people, would have evolved at a much slower rate. Sure, people devote their life's work to eradicating diseases or ending world hunger, but might one presume that both the latter and the former may have at least some to do with ego or perhaps the promotion of one's legacy?

Many pursue self-interested desires to promote individual economic prosperity because who really wants to be poor? According to MacMillan (2017), one who earns a higher wage, relative to the average person, is apt to harbor greater self-respect and admiration for oneself. On the other hand, those who identify with a lower socioeconomic status do not hold the same regard for themselves as their wealthier counterparts (Piff & Moskowitz, 2018). There is a growing field of study that considers the correlation between social class and mental health:

> Increased material resources afford upper class individuals' greater autonomy and
>
> reduced exposure to social and environmental threat, giving rise to an internal, self-
>
> oriented focus— greater attention to one's internal states and goals and increased
>
> independence from others, as evidenced, for example, by decreased social attentiveness
>
> and more self-interested behavior. (p. 903)

With that in mind, would it be plausible to assert that the successes of self-interested individuals

perpetuate further self-serving behaviors? Conversely, those with a more meager lifestyle, in

comparison, seem to have a greater focus on those around them, rather than on their own

personal well-being. If this is in fact true, would it be reasonable to believe that those from

humbler backgrounds might serve as better leaders or refrain from engaging in leader self-

serving behavior than those born with silver spoons in their mouths?

Rational Egoism. The theory of rational egoism suggests that a person's decisions and

actions are justified so long as those decisions and actions improve the overall wellbeing of the

agent (Brink, 1997). However, rational thought, as Lindenberg (2013) would argue, is subjective

and a matter of self-regulation. From a rational egoist's perspective, engaging in immoral

behavior, like firing one's competition without cause, could be justified because doing so would

increase a self-serving leader's chances of promotion. Furthermore, this behavior would also be

considered "rational" because it maximizes the benefit to the self (Sharaf et al., 2015; Bazerman,

2014), although the morality of behavior hinges upon one's beliefs.

Brink (1997) posits rational egoism as a "*hybrid* theory of rationality: it is temporally

neutral but agent-biased" (p. 98). Although egoistic behavior may require immediate action, it

behooves one to consider the future implications of their present actions. The rational egoist

would likely recommend that a self-serving leader ought not be hasty with their exploits because their future needs might outweigh those at the present moment.

   Ethical Egoism. Ethical egoism claims that an individual's behavior is morally just if their actions promote their personal interests, (Regis, 1980; Tilley, 2022). In fact, "morality requires that we balance our own interests against the interests of others" (Rachels, 2012, p. 193). At times, humans pursue ends that manifest themselves in the form of short-term pleasures (e.g., larceny, alcohol abuse, or a leader's exploitation of their direct reports) that not only result in the harm of others but also future harm to the actor. Similar to rational egoism, Rachels (2012) discusses an interesting notion that ethical egoism "endorses selfishness, but it doesn't endorse foolishness" (p. 194). On one hand, the selfishness involved with leader self-serving behavior could be rationalized because it leads to a legitimate end (i.e., one's individual career advancement). On another, the behavior might also be considered foolish as it is the result of seemingly misguided judgment and senselessly harms another. In any case, ethical decisions depend on the moral identity of the individual (Rothstein, 2022). Thus, Crocker et al. (2017) recommends proceeding with caution when considering one's self-centered motivation(s) as doing so could lead to strained personal and/or professional relationships.

The Effects of the Dark Tetrad in the Workplace

   Current literature on the topic, as noted by Sauer et al. (2018), discusses the link between organizational goal setting and behaviors associated with the concept of the *Dark Tetrad* (Mead et al., 2009). Paulhus and Williams (2002) first brought to light the precursor to the latter, the "*Dark Triad*," which is a theory comprising three relatively notable and even more negative personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (p. 1). In recent years, the Dark Triad transformed, gaining a fourth personality trait, sadism (Book et al., 2016). Personality

traits in this category tempt those who harbor them to engage in antisocial behaviors to achieve

their goals.

Machiavellianism

Two of the most preeminent thought leaders on the topic, Christie and Geis (1970),

define *Machiavellianism* as: "a strategy of social conduct that involves manipulating others for

personal gain" (p. 285). Walzer (2015) pegs Machiavelli as a consequentialist, or one who

determines the morality of action in terms of consequence (believe it or not), good or bad.

Beauchamp and Childress (2001) note that consequentialists evaluate and classify actions in

terms of balance, positively and negatively. From a consequentialist's perspective, one's goal in

life is to maximize utility, while assigning uniform significance to all in question. Unlike their

theoretical counterparts, consequentialists are not concerned with the specifications of desired

outputs. The aim, however, is that an output for one should not supersede the output for another.

Walzer continues to interject a rather interesting theory. He claims that the public is capable of

justifying immoral behavior if the result is something good. To that end, could it be presumed

that organizations would condone leader self-serving behavior as long as goals are met, and

profitability is on the rise?

Machiavellians are calculated when it comes to engaging in unethical behavior (Jones &

Mueller, 2021). They are people who lack a defined moral identity. Their interests are top

priority and to a fault, much like the leader who is fixated on career progression, with a

willingness to stop at nothing to reach the highest rung on the corporate ladder (Jones, 2020).

Machiavellians have trust issues and are intoxicated by power, control, and status, to name a few

(Dahling et al., 2009). These types of leaders are the puppeteers of the business world, abusing

their power to manipulate the emotions and behaviors of their subordinates, colleagues, and

superiors to support their selfish causes. Case in point, Machiavellians are experts in the dark art of manipulation (Paulhus, 2014).

Narcissism

For the purposes of this discussion, the researcher focused on behaviors associated with subclinical narcissism, which differs from clinically diagnosed narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). In this study, *narcissism* is a personality trait that leads individuals to become excessively self-absorbed and lacking empathy (Brunell et al., 2008). Consequently, self-absorbed individuals who are obsessed with the maximization of their personal utility, as well as the incessant promotion of social status are said to be narcissists (Vazire et al., 2008). To that end, Raskin & Hall (1979) categorize *narcissistic leaders* as having an aggrandized view of themselves, especially in terms of their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Furthermore, their attention is focused on themselves and themselves only.

Self-serving leaders who harbor narcissistic tendencies not only exploit the hollow relationships held with their employees, colleagues, and superiors for personal gain but to also be the recipients of their acquaintances' admiration (LeBreton et al., 2018). With that in mind, it is presumable that the narcissistic leader might wish to be put on a pedestal, like that of a king or queen, for the opportunity to look down on their seemingly unworthy subjects. Harboring this "larger than life" persona, it is expected that narcissistic (self-serving) leaders would hold no qualms with exploiting their colleagues, subordinates, or superiors to support their efforts in promoting their individual interests (Ramos-Villagrasa et al., 2020).

Psychopathy

Much like with our discussion of subclinical narcissism, the researcher uses the term "psychopathy" in the subclinical sense. According to Hare (1993), *psychopaths* are "social

predators who charm, manipulate and ruthlessly plow their way through life, leaving a broad trail of broken hearts, shattered expectations, and empty wallets" (p. ix). Luckily for the psychopathic leader, we are captivated by charisma (Ciulla, 2004). They are daring, exhibit antisocial behavior, and seemingly incapable of exercising restraint (Patrick, 2022). Fooled by their magnetism, naïve employees and the like might be easily manipulated by the apathetic psychopath who sacrifices them like a disposable pawn in their wicked game of chess. Because they lack impulse control, it is likely that the psychopathic leader will stop at nothing to achieve whatever they desire, with little to no remorse for their actions, no matter how unethical or immoral (Hare, 1993; LeBreton et al., 2018).

Sadism

Like our discussions of subclinical narcissism and psychopathy, the following discourse about sadism should not be considered in a clinical capacity; but rather, everyday life. Paulhus (2014) describes the "*everyday sadist*" as someone who finds pleasure in inflicting harm on others (p. 422). Unsurprisingly, there is a link between psychopathy and sadism in terms of the antisocial behaviors associated with each personality trait (Reidy et al., 2011). Per the latter, psychopathic (self-serving) leaders would not think twice about inflating their numbers to hit their quarterly bonus, taking credit for their team's work when they shared none of the workload, or falsely incriminating a colleague to eliminate any sort of competition for the promotion with the corner office. Much to the self-serving leader's chagrin, however, to engage in immoral behavior can be counterproductive to the cause as it can impede their career advancement (De Brito et al., 2021).

The Impacts of Moral Development and Moral Judgment on Moral Behavior

Due to the seemingly capricious nature of human beings, it is difficult to anticipate how one might respond when presented with an opportunity to self-serve. Because no two people are exactly alike, moral development varies from person to person (Kohlberg, 1984). Nevertheless, we are born with the moral predisposition to perceive right from wrong. While "we are naturally kind to others…we possess ugly instincts as well, and these can metastasize into evil" (Bloom, 2014, p. 8). In the context of leadership ethics and organizational behavior, a leader's behavior is proportionate to the development of their moral identity and regulated by an intrinsic value system individual to the self (Kwon et al., 2023). Depending on the person and their moral development, this intrinsic motivation could manifest itself in the form of prosocial or antisocial behavior.

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Northouse (2021) examines Kohlberg's (1984) discussion pertaining to the *moral development* of our species, which is as follows:

Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment. At this point in one's moral development, one views moral dilemmas in black and white terms. They perceive it to be their moral obligation to obey orders because that is what is expected of them. In turn, actors will obey the rules to eschew punishment. In the context of this study, leaders at the Obedience and Punishment stage follow top-down initiatives without contest to ensure they are perceived as subordinate and a member of the team.

Stage 2: Individualism and Exchange. At stage 2, people adopt an egoist's perspective, confronting moral dilemmas through self-interested means. The latter includes acts of altruism that in nature benefit the self, known as *enlightened self-interest* (Peake et al., 2015). In which

case, agents compromise individual utility to promote their collective, yet separate interests akin

to that of leader-member exchange theory and the formation of dyadic relationships (Northouse,

2021).

Stage 3: Interpersonal Accord and Conformity. At this stage, agents act with

benevolent intention. They do something because it is the "right" thing to do as per the idea of a

common morality. For instance, a leader with an underperforming employee would be inclined

to offer mentorship to personally see to their improvement, rather than simply terminating their

employment.

Stage 4: Maintaining the Social Order. Individuals at stage 4 consider morality from an

other-centered perspective (Peters, 2015). They express concern for their fellow man and society

in general. At this stage of moral development, leaders would consider the repercussions of their

actions to determine if pursuits aimed at improving their circumstances are more important than

negatively impacting those around them.

Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights. At stage 5, agents frame their actions

relative to that of a common morality. Although, social contracts are only as good as those who

write them (Northouse, 2021). As we know, people do not always hold the same values, which

poses a problem for societal cooperation. In which case, leaders might adopt a utilitarian

approach to promote the greatest good for the greatest number, thus considering the interests of

others in addition to their own, thwarting a narcissistic impulse.

Stage 6: Universal Principles. At this stage, leaders would call on Kantian wisdom to

address moral decisions. Kant would likely prescribe the universal acceptance of justice aligned

with that of the Categorical Imperative to promote fairness among the masses (Brenkert &

Beauchamp, 2012).

The Dark Side of Emotional Intelligence

Before delving deeper into the inner workings of the dark side of emotional intelligence, it might be beneficial to first discuss emotional intelligence even if only at face value. We all have likely heard of the intelligence quotient (IQ). In a similar fashion, emotional intelligence is supported by one's emotional quotient (EQ). Consequently, *emotional intelligence* is one's acknowledgement and recognition of one's feelings and emotions, as well as the feelings and emotions of those around them (Salovey & Mayer, 2004). It enables people to characterize their emotions relative to their feelings associated with a person, place, or thing (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Consequently, emotionally intelligent individuals tend to be more successful in both their educational and professional pursuits because they can regulate their emotions to focus on the task at hand (MacCann et al., 2020).

Although purveyors of the dark arts (i.e., the Dark Tetrad) tend to lack empathy they may still be incredibly emotionally intelligent. Emotional intelligence is what makes us sentient beings but that does not mean the apathetic psychopath necessarily feels their emotions (Mayer et al., 1990). *Empathy* refers to an individual's sentient response to emotional stimuli and triggers (Keen, 2007). Essentially, it is how one understands the feelings of another (i.e., to empathize) by drawing from personal experience. Although empathy is not in and of itself an emotion (Stadler, 2017), it supports the development of an individual's moral identity (Nussbaum, 2003). Yet again, one does not necessarily need to have the ability to feel empathy to be emotionally intelligent. Instead, they (self-serving leaders) must simply understand how to best use the emotions of another to the benefit of the agent. For example, an emotionally intelligent person can persuade or worse: manipulate another simply by regulating their emotions, especially to elicit positive emotions toward the actor. In fact, having a heightened

emotional intelligence equips leaders with the ability to manipulate the emotions of their

followers and colleagues for their personal gain. Nevertheless, emotionally intelligent individuals

tend to be more successful in both their educational and professional pursuits, among other

things (MacCann et al., 2020).

Per the late business tycoon, J.P. Morgan, "A man always has two reasons for doing

anything. A good reason and a real reason" (Forbes, 2015). While emotional intelligence is an

incredibly useful skill to have, especially in instances in which it is wielded for good, as the

previous statement suggests, those who possess it are not always benevolent creatures. In turn,

Goffman (1959) suggests that perpetrators of the dark side of emotional intelligence deliberately

weave elaborate webs to both regulate and manipulate the emotions of others. Going one step

further, self-serving leaders are likely to manipulate the perceptions of their superiors, as well as

their colleagues and subordinates alike to ensure they are viewed in the best positive light,

especially those who are obsessed with vanity and an insatiable desire to be admired. Schlenker

(1980) defines *impression management* as an "attempt to control images that are projected in real

or imagined social interactions" (p. 6). Whether it is used for good or bad, impression

management is vital to the success of a self-serving leader's pursuits.

Dual-Process Theory

With regards to moral decision-making, *dual-process theory* illuminates the interplay

between rational thought and intuition (Evans & Stanovich, 2013). Rational thought requires the

actor to regulate their emotions and to apply conscious effort to drive conclusions. Conversely,

(moral) intuition is instinctual and bases decisions partly on a person's immediate emotional

responses (Singer, 2005). "Like rational information processing, the intuitive process includes

problem definition, analysis, and synthesis, but these stages occur faster and are mostly non-

conscious and deeply intertwined" (Calabretta et al., 2017, p. 366). Although visceral, intuitive

decisions are supplemented by rudimentary cost-benefit analyses of external data to quickly draw

conclusions or to promote unencumbered action. Nevertheless, dual-process decision making is

supported by the power of choice, which may or may not tempt one's compulsion to self-serve

(Padilla et al., 2018).

This dichotomy between deliberate and automatic responses influences the complexity of

moral decision-making, especially for those with an underdeveloped moral identity (Calabretta et

al., 2017). Consequently, leaders with advanced moral identities are more apt to behave ethically

and to pursue prosocial ends instead of those that may inflict harm to another. Having said that,

rational decisions are conceptualized through analyses of experiential data (Hogarth, 2014).

Often, moral decisions leave individuals feeling conflicted as the line between pragmatic rational

thought and visceral intuition blurs. Fuzzy logic is the result of "imprecise input" that is

influenced by an internal conflict driven by external temptations (Velasquez & Hester, 2013, p.

59). Coupling an internal conflict with extrinsic pressures is likely to entice leaders to act outside

of their character and moral identity. In turn, they may feel as if there is no other option than to

self-serve due to how corporate rewards systems emphasize performance, by any means

necessary (Barsky, 2008; Forensic, 2013; Gürlek, 2021).

Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice theory explores the subjective and objective pressures one experiences

when faced with moral decisions (Friedman & Hechter, 1988). In the context of leader self-

serving behavior, subjective pressures manifest as one's internal conflict that involves the

maximization of one's personal utility against that of objective societal norms (i.e., a common

morality). From this perspective, Sato (2013) would likely contend that self-serving leaders

succumb to the subjective pressures of their internal conflicts in the pursuit of "an alternative that he/she believes brings about a social outcome that maximizes his/her utility (payoff) under subjectively conceived constraints" (p. 1). Considering the presented alternatives, the actor conducts a cost-benefit analysis to determine which outcome would result in the highest net benefit (Chustecki, 2023; Krstić, 2022). Based on the principles of rational egoism, the behavior would be morally justifiable as it aligns with one's moral obligation to the self (i.e., promote personal gain). Like corporate rewards systems, an overemphasis of the end(s) seems to justify the means. But what about the subordinates of self-serving leaders? Cut to the aspiring senior leader who has reached a crossroads in their career. They are up for promotion, but their team has been struggling to hit their fourth-quarter targets. Who is to blame, the leader or their subordinates? If the leader steps forward to accept fault in the matter, their competence will likely be questioned, impeding their chance(s) to enter the upper echelon of the organization. Since companies do not reward employees who underperform, the aspiring senior leader faces a difficult moral decision.

Lewin (1991) discusses the duality of self-and public interest. More specifically, how both public and social choice coexist within our delicate ecosystem. *Public choice* is the idea that human behavior is the byproduct of self-interested desire, whereas *social choice*, on the other hand, stems from collectivist doctrine. Nonetheless, it is to be understood that both schools of thought are rooted in rational choice theory, (i.e., that it is perfectly acceptable for one to hold aspirations of attaining a predetermined objective, however possible). 'However possible' does not suggest that one should or must partake in unethical behavior to advance one's career. Immorality is in no way condoned in professional settings, nor everyday life, for that matter. But again, human beings are fallible. Downs (1957) notes that even the most noble of people act on

selfish desires due to human fallibility and unfortunately their pursuits may very well be at the expense of another. Although Kant has taught us that one ought not ever use another solely as a means to an end (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001), that is presumably implausible. However, if we are to consider the ordinary person to be motivated by rational beliefs, how is it that some fall victim to unethical treatment?

Even if we, as a collective, were to subscribe to the concept of a common morality, it is difficult to administer moral judgment from a binary perspective. To some, Robin Hood was a burglarious outlaw and to others, a rational philanthropist. The situational dependence of rational decision-making adds yet another layer of complexity to moral decisions (Wheeler, 2018). Wheeler provides commentary on how Weber's theory of substantiative rationality pulls from Kantian rhetoric to make sense of whether the ends justify the means (Wheeler, 2018). At times, it may be more worthwhile or self-serving to pursue matters that provide a benefit for all or most, not just the agent, for future use. *Substantive rationality* applies a method to the madness (Kalberg, 1980). This theory helps the mind's eye to both see and understand the motivation behind one's ends, as well as the means to accomplish one's goals, both in political and economic contexts. It helps individuals to not only understand the gravity, but to also confront the reality of the situation at hand, attempting to make sense of the intersection of practicality and morality as each relates to human behavior. In turn, is it always practical or even possible to be ethical in all aspects of life? More simply, are we as human beings capable of always behaving morally? If not, what is our breaking point? Is it when one's actions become purely altruistic or perhaps when one's participation does not beget a tangible benefit to oneself?

Game Theory

Game theory considers rational decision-making in terms of the coexistence between an actor's personal preferences and social norms (Gintis, 2014; Trivers, 1971). While one's preferences may not be innately selfish, the fact that humans harbor a natural temptation to self-serve should not be ignored. Regardless, not everyone shares the same beliefs, interests, or preferences, nor do they always act on self-serving urges. That said, people sometimes struggle to find common ground or at the very least, cooperate. Life is a game of choice that is influenced by competing interests, interests derived from both the self, as well as external stimuli (Riar et al., 2023). The choices we make have consequences and directly impact the paths we take. One wrong decision and the course of one's life could change dramatically. Take former Tyco Electronics CEO, Dennis Kozlowski, for instance. Due to greed, he made the choice to misappropriate millions of corporate funds which led to the untimely demise of his career and worse, a prison sentence (Neal, 2014). How about the Enron scandal? Because a select group of individuals were plagued by the dark tetrad, tens of thousands of people were stripped of their livelihoods and hard-earned retirement funds (Currall et. al., 2003). This type of behavior is at the foundation of game theory, or the "multiplayer decision theory where the choices of each player affect the payoffs to other players, and the players take this into account in their choice behavior" (Peters, 2015, p. 45).

Game theory is concerned with the dichotomy of self-centered versus other-centered behavior. In the context of self-interested behavior, Peters (2015) might redefine the latter as "self-regarding" behavior since "an other-regarding individual is still acting to maximize utility and so can be described as self-interested" (p. 46). Thus, reverting to the assertion that not all self-interested pursuits are malicious because there may be times in which it serves one's

interests to behave altruistically (Leyton-Brown & Shoham, 2022). That said, a leader's decision to engage in self-serving behavior is a "game" of choice relative to their moral principles. One's "moral judgment is influenced by both automatic emotional responses (automatic settings) and controlled, conscious reasoning (manual mode)" (Greene, 2014, p. 698), which assumes that one's behavior is based on rational thought. For the psychopathic self-serving leader, however, that may not be the case. Nevertheless, Greene would likely suggest that this exchange between automatic and manual responses is akin to the division between deontology and utilitarianism.

Deontology

Deontology is a moral philosophy that is concerned with one's conformity to an established set of moral norms (Rawling, 2023; Gawronski & Beer, 2017). These moral norms manifest in the form of one's duty or obligation, regardless of one's circumstance, to behave in accordance with what Immanuel Kant would call the categorical imperative (Brenkert & Beauchamp, 2012). Considering the fallibility of human beings, the categorical imperative intends to create a central or universal code of ethics by which we should all unconditionally abide (Johnson & Cureton, 2004). It establishes a basis of reason from which rational people can validate the suitability of the maxims that guide moral life (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001).

Kant's categorical imperative is formulated in a number of ways. The first formulation maintains the *principle of universalizability*, which scrutinizes any action in terms of how rational individuals would accept it as moral behavior and universal law (Timmons, 2006). Since leader self-serving behavior is immoral it is not generalizable to a rational society and would be rejected as universal law because the categorical imperative does not permit exceptions (Bowie, 2002). Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative maintains that people should exclusively be considered ends and never simply as a means (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019).

While the latter would forbid it, self-serving leaders disobey this obligation because they fail to

resist their immoral desires. Instead, they happily exploit their subordinates, colleagues, and

organizations as means to their self-serving ends because their personal interests supersede all.

Drawing from the first and second formulations of the categorical imperative, the third

formulation is Kant's depiction of a "Kingdom of Ends." The kingdom of ends is a moral utopia

of sorts to which self-serving leaders would not be welcome. It reinforces the second formulation

with its call for rational persons to act in accordance with maxims derived from universal law to

create an environment in which everyone is treated as an end (Bowie, 2002).

Utilitarianism

Derived from consequentialism, *utilitarianism* suggests that moral behavior aligns with

the promotion of "the greatest good for the greatest number" (Northouse, 2021, p. 426).

Utilitarians aim to maximize utility by minimizing pain with pursuits of pleasure (Mill, 2016).

The trouble with converging on a universal acceptance of utilitarianism is that not everyone

shares the same values. For example, Beauchamp and Childress (2001) discuss the differences of

opinion held by rule and act utilitarians in terms of how utility is promoted. *Rule utilitarians*

maintain that an act is right if it follows a rule that on balance maximizes utility more than

minimizes it, even though in any individual case an act may minimize utility. *Act utilitarians*,

however, observe moral rules so long as they promote utility in every case and ignore them when

utility is obstructed. In any event, self-serving leaders would not subscribe to any aspect of

utilitarianism because their sole interest is to promote the greatest good for themselves, not the

greatest number. Lewin (1991) would liken these kinds of decisions as derivations of "rational

choice" guided by self-interested motives (p. 3). As we have already discussed, self-interested

behavior is not inherently negative, especially when one's actions are legitimate and pursued in

good faith. Ipso facto, not all decisions made to enter leadership positions are supplemented by greed or irrespective of how one's actions might negatively impact another. However, one's environment tends to influence one's behavior. Operating in a system that rewards results primarily challenge one's moral courage and seemingly promotes immoral behavior as a means to an end.

Developing Organizational Cultures on Unethical Footings

A fundamental definition of *organization development*, as per Beckhard (1969), is "an effort (1) *planned*, (2) *organizationwide*, and (3) *managed* from the top, to (4) increase *organization effectiveness* and *health* through (5) *planned interventions* in the organization's 'processes,' using *behavioral-science* knowledge" (p. 9). Offering a modern take on the subject, Anderson (2019) defines organization development as "the process of increasing organizational effectiveness and facilitating personal and organizational change through the use of interventions driven by social and behavioral science knowledge" (p. 2). In sum, organization development lays the foundation from which an organization's culture evolves.

Synthesizing the classic literature of their time, Allaire and Firsirotu (1984) consider the concept of *organizational culture* in terms of a collective "sharing of values, norms, roles, and expectations" that drives behavior (p. 208). The latter makes parallels to Schein's (2010) work throughout the 20th century, which recognizes organizational culture as a series of levels that should "be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel" (p. 17) with regards to how they ought to approach internal and external relationships. Kotter (2008) aligns with this vision of levels albeit in a binary sense. From their perspective, organizational culture materializes on the surface in terms of how it influences the behaviors and actions of a staff. At a deeper level, organizational culture speaks to the individual and shared definitions of utility.

While organizations might be founded on a shared vision, one might presume that those who manage daily operations might not be aligned in terms of a common mission. Self-serving leaders both create and perpetuate bad barrels as they lobby for process improvements that promote individual interests rather than those that support positive organizational growth or the organization's ability to better serve its customers (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Unfortunately, organizations that lack alignment on ethical culture and/or fail to enforce accountability measures aimed at preventing unethical behavior in the workplace inadvertently permit just that. What organizations and leaders alike must acknowledge and understand is that "regardless of whether the direct and immediate impact of leaders' behaviors on others is positive, negative, or neutral, leaders who regularly prioritize their own needs and goals ultimately will have a negative long-term net impact on their organization" (Williams, 2014, p. 1366).

Institutional Inefficiencies in Organizational Culture

As has been discussed, corporate environments are hyper-competitive ecosystems burdened by "irresistible pressures" (McDowell, 1994, p. 161). As markets become increasingly saturated, companies must find ways to remain competitive to uphold their share or increase their influence. The same could be said for the individuals who lead organizations, especially those in volatile industries. Some might argue that the former triggers one's fight-or-flight response to simply maintain employment, let alone progress within the organization. Furthermore, it could influence a leader's self-serving behavior in terms of keeping oneself relevant and at top of mind to those who hold the keys to promotional opportunities and the like. However, "business decisions are not made in a vacuum, but are embedded in normative forces that are stronger than the organizations themselves" (Gonin at al., 2012, p. 3). One might presume that a leader's self-serving behavior is catalyzed by the moral inconsistencies among members within our society.

To that end, the researcher also assessed leader self-serving behavior from that of a moral or ethical perspective to attempt to understand the possible justifications of the phenomenon.

To confirm, *self-serving behavior* refers to the promotion of one's interests, while lacking any sort of forethought regarding how one's efforts might affect the lives of others (Rus et al., 2010). Theoretically, then, a leader's self-serving bias would influence their decision(s) to engage in self-serving behavior, would it not? "We struggle along with such thick layers of bias and rationalization, compartmentalization and denial, that our choices suffer immeasurably" (Bok, 2011, p. 71). That said, is there an acceptable amount of self-interest or selfishness, for that matter, which might be condoned in order to lead and/or promote one's professional development? When and where do one's morals come into play? Think about yourself, how often do you struggle to rationalize your moral decisions? Each day, we are subjected to and consume information that likely differs from our core beliefs. Thus, challenging the fine tuning of one's moral compass may leave one questioning the validity of reason, in terms of what one might perceive, relative to the concept of a common morality. The latter is what Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) deem to be *ethical fading*, which transpires when the implications of one's actions are knowingly or unknowingly concealed to distort the moral decision-making process in a way that justifies immoral behavior. Ethical fading is founded on the concept of self-deception, or the process in which an individual deludes themself to the point in which fiction becomes fact (Messick & Bazerman, 1996). In the workplace, leaders are forced to grapple with the repercussions of their actions, whether they are willing to acknowledge them. To support their professional development, they must balance the promotion of personal interests while with considerations of how their behaviors and decisions might negatively impact the organization's

bottom line, as well as the livelihoods of their colleagues and subordinates alike (Noval & Hernandez (2019).

Nevertheless, "we don't want to be ruled by men who have lost their souls" (Walzer, 2015, p. 177). Smith (1994) illustrates the dynamic between a professional and the services they offer to others as *functional role justification*. Specifically, the *reciprocal condition*, or what the professional expects as payment for the services provided. In the process, a relationship is created between a professional and client to support a cause. For our purposes, *leader* is to be considered synonymous with professional and *employee* with client. This concept is a major point of contention between both parties, especially from the perspective of the client, or *layperson*. The professional-client relationship is akin to that of a parent and their child in terms inequalities and co-dependence (Wasserstrom, 1975). A professional may devalue their clients by considering them less as sentient beings and more so as something that requires the professional's expertise, or in this case, leadership. In trying to understand the professional's perspective, one must remove emotion from the equation. A leader's work, while difficult, is bound to become routine with practice and experience. As a result, one might presume that the luster of one's role may dissipate as the years pass.

Because humans are flawed in many ways, might one surmise that our institutions are defective as a result of human imperfection being that we are the culprits who had created them? Nevertheless, leaders are typically selected and hired based on the knowledge, skills, and abilities they have developed through practical means and their efforts are to act with the organization's best interests in mind. It is here where the disconnect can be found. Acting on self-interested desires for personal gain is one thing, but it is beyond reproach when doing so negatively affects another, especially when it is one's duty to support and lead others. Unfettered

altruism, as Ciulla (2004) believes, is not a prerequisite to ethical leadership, though there is

immense value in selfless action. If leaders were reminded of why they had decided to lead in the

first place, perhaps they would be more inclined to promote the advancement of all involved

(Mansbridge, 1990).

Dirty Hands Theory

Nielsen (2007) provides a simple, yet detailed description of the paradox that political

scientists and theorists have coined: *dirty hands*. At its core, the concept describes the plight of a

politician by considering the moral quandaries that trouble our world's leaders. As with most

things in life, political process seldom produces black and white solutions and/or alternatives.

Decisions are convoluted with gray hues of indecision and confusion. Walzer (2015) examines

the construct in terms of exaggerated proportions. A portion of their narrative revolves around

Churchill's decision to take matters into the hands of the Allied forces. "In certain cases being

ethical is being effective and sometimes being effective *is* ethical" (Ciulla, 2004, p. 119). It is

undeniable that Churchill's decision was effective, but the question is: to what end were his

actions warranted? More directly, is it morally just to sacrifice the life of one to save that of

another, especially when the possibility of collateral damage is ever-present? How was it

determined that the lives of the innocent bystander were not important enough to find another

solution? Was there another solution? Regardless of the answer, self-interest trumped all in the

name of self-preservation. At the end of the day, we, as individuals, presumably consider

ourselves most important. After all, the saying is the survival of the fittest, right?

While it is interesting to read and consider Walzer's perspective as it relates to the soiling

of political hands, there are many critical analyses, one of which cannot go without mention. As

Walzer criticizes the likes of Machiavelli, it is only fair to consider those who oppose Walzer's

views, in a similar fashion. "It seems to me, on the basis of these considerations, that Walzer's

doctrine of supreme emergency is muddled in conception and dangerous in consequence"

(Orend, 2001, p. 28). It is quite apparent that Orend does not align with Walzer's perceptions

and/or thoughts as they pertain to the theory of dirty hands. Nielsen (2007), however, views the

concept quite differently. When leading a group of people, it is almost inevitable that one will

dirty one's hands, at least some capacity, according to Walzer. He does not see it as a dilemma

between doing what is right or what is wrong, or a battle between good and evil. To him, there

are no better options. Typically, both choices are bad choices, but one is less impactful than the

other. It may be the lesser evil, perhaps. This is what makes the decision difficult: the

uncertainty. Just the same, those who fail to act and recoil in these circumstances are just as

guilty as those doing the "dirty work."

At one end of the "clean hands" theory spectrum, one is both disinterested and seemingly

incapable of being swayed, irrespective of the possible repercussions (Calhoun, 1995). At

another, those who keep quiet may be pegged as those devoid of integrity because acting with

integrity is just that: acting on something. Either way, the theory claims that one's hands will

assuredly get dirty. Calhoun (1995) suggests that hypocrites lack integrity because they are

incredibly quick to abandon their virtues in cases in which their beliefs misalign with another

who may be able to support their self-interested motives and objectives. "They cooperate with

evil, compromise with opponents, and remain silent when their own principles and values tell

them they ought not" (p. 250). To some, the latter might appear to be the behavior of a coward,

or at least someone who is willing to do whatever it takes to succeed in life. Might some actually

do "whatever it takes" if doing so might support their self-serving aspirations? According to

urban legend, bluesman, Robert Johnson, sold his soul to the devil to be a better guitar player

(Pearson & McCulloch, 2010). If that is indeed true, maybe we really are capable of anything when it comes to getting what we want.

It is curious to wonder if there is an antidote to eradicate the issues which plague our society. One might conclude that a utilitarian approach to conducting business is a possible solution being that it promotes the greatest good for the greatest number (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). On the contrary, it is nearly impossible for leaders to please each and every one of their employees in aggregate since not every person holds the same values as their neighbor. For example, Beauchamp and Childress (2001) note that hedonistic utilitarians measure value in terms of the happiness it brings individuals, while others are more concerned with "intrinsic value" and the maximization of the "overall satisfaction of the preferences of the greatest number of individuals" (p. 342). Furthermore, Sen (1977) explores utilitarian doctrine as it pertains to social welfare. Economists and social scientists alike might examine the advancement of society by way of the Pareto Efficiency, which declares that one's fortune cannot be realized without the misfortune of at least one other individual. Sen (1977) finds this theory shortsighted as it lacks considerations of individual preference. As a result, he proposes that supplementary research is required to determine a more exacting approach to understanding the overall well-being of our nation's society.

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is defined as the display of "normatively appropriate conduct" to promote a culture of ethics in the workplace (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). In this context, ethical leadership aligns with normative theory, in terms of how one should or ought to act, which differs from descriptive theory, which refers to the reality of one's actions (Over, 2004). While much of this study was based on *normative ethics*, which attempts to create a delineation

between right and wrong (Kagan, 2018), the goal of the researcher was to add to descriptive

theories relative to the concept of leader self-serving behavior.

Ethical considerations in one's practice are the keystone of leadership in terms of how

society perceives it because ethical leaders "shape and affect corporate culture" (Asif et al.,

2019, p. 4; Ciulla, 2004). To that end, it is a leader's moral obligation to promote a culture of

accountability that enforces ethical behavior (Solinger et al., 2020). Conversely, leaders who

manipulate the emotions of their superiors, colleagues, and subordinates do so to support their

personal agendas (Côté et al., 2011). Sometimes, when judging leaders, like the lady peacock, we

are mystified by charisma and charm. We might think that one leader is better than another

because the latter is well-spoken and can captivate an audience. Now, that is fine, but is this kind

of person fit to lead a team of people? Maybe or maybe not. Now, is it to be implied that leaders

are models of morality? No, because they are only human. Ciulla (2004) suggests laypeople

should perceive leaders as no different than themselves, that we all should be regulated by the

same ethical standards, thus promoting moral consistency. With division might come exceptions,

she suggests. In such cases, leaders may believe they have the right to act outside the "rules" the

rest of us are supposed to follow. In essence, the point she is trying to make is that one's actions

should align with the moral standards one claims to support. If not, a leader is likely not to be

trusted. Trust is at the foundation of any relationship. Without it, how can one believe that one's

counterpart will act in their interest?

Cuddy (2015) discusses the cohabitation of competence and trustworthiness as they relate

to human interaction. Before one considers another's competence, they must first be able to trust

their counterpart. Human relationships are held by people who are riddled with emotions. These

emotions, while valid, may lead people to believe the worst in the best of people because we all

have our biases and preconceived notions of others, whether we are willing to acknowledge or admit it. Take your local car salesperson, for instance. If one perceives that they cannot be trusted, there is little chance the deal will come to fruition, as the client may feel manipulated over the course of the transaction. Sometimes, though, professionals and leaders alike experience changes of heart, as well as perspective. Ciulla (2004) claims that to be morally consistent does not mean that one must never waver in one's beliefs. We are not perfect, though that is the standard we often set for ourselves. We are meant to evolve and grow but it seems that we seem to lose sight of this concept, from time to time. The key is that when leaders enact change, whether in policy or as a result of workforce management, they must be unequivocally transparent.

Leader Self-Serving Behavior

Are self-serving leaders an anomaly or perhaps a handful of "bad apples," or is the corporate ecosystem (i.e., "bad barrel") at fault? Either way, self-serving leaders tend to engage in unethical behavior that is destructive and deteriorates the moral fabric of the institutions in which they work (Liu et al. 2022; Peng et al., 2019). Krasikova et al. (2013) defines *destructive leadership* as:

> Volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intend to harm a leader's organization and/or followers by (a) encouraging followers to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interests of the organization and/or (b) employing a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence with followers, regardless of justifications for such behavior. (p. 1310)

Destructive leaders, who are coerced by innate impulses to self-serve, use their positions of power for personal gain (Northouse, 2021). In a general sense, self-serving behavior refers to the

promotion of one's interests, irrespective of how the latter might negatively impact another (Rus et al., 2012). In turn, self-serving leaders believe their interests take precedence more than anything else, whether that is their employer, colleagues, or subordinates (Decoster et al., 2014). Wisse et al. (2019) claim that leaders engage in self-serving behavior to combat losses in influence, which is likely influenced by an unhealthy fear of failure relative to a lack of emotional security in one's professional life (Babalola et al., 2023). Nonetheless, Camps et al. (2012) suggests that self-serving leaders can behave ethically and/or morally, depending on the situation and what is at stake. Thus, confirming the notion that not all self-interested behavior is negative, although it can certainly drive people to perpetuate negativity through selfish means.

Based on the concept of a common morality, there should be no excuse for lapses in ethical judgement, especially for those working in a professional capacity. That said, efforts should be centralized around identifying and understanding the "justifiable" alibis that correlate to such wrongdoings (McDowell, 1994, p. 158). While it is true that individuals should be held accountable for their actions, one might also suggest that there should be reasonable exceptions for simple human limitation. After all, no one is perfect and depending on perspective, people tend to deserve second chances, within reason, of course. Nevertheless, Kantian ethics would contend that one should always consider others as ends and never means (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). Although, it is implausible to believe that people can go through life without a seemingly (innocent) unethical decision. Due to the unfathomable number of situations one might encounter over the course of a lifetime, mistakes are inevitable because of our insatiable drives to self-serve (Downs, 1957).

The Unexpected Drawbacks of Corporate Rewards Systems

Corporate rewards systems are leveraged by organizations to motivate employees in such a way that increases productivity and elicits desired outputs (Armstrong & Stephens, 2005). Additionally, Kerr and Slocum (2005) claim that rewards systems, focused on two key components: "performance and rewards," help to align an organization and its employees in terms of corporate culture (p. 130). The latter is an attempt to align both parties with a shared perspective in support of a (high) performance culture. From their perspective, performance is measured by way of evaluation and assessment, whereas rewards typically consist of monetary incentives or any compensation that is awarded in addition to an employee's base salary, both of which are leveraged to reinforce desired behaviors in staff. If implemented appropriately, rewards systems incentivize employees to perform at a heightened level but also support employee engagement, "job satisfaction" and devotion to the organization (Coccia & Igor, 2018, p. 2). Employee satisfaction tends to translate to a greater sense of loyalty to one's employer which ultimately leads to improvements in individual and organizational performance (Matzler & Renzl, 2006). Although the aim of rewards systems is to promote positive outcomes, sometimes they lead to grave repercussions.

While rewards systems can boost employee performance and spark friendly competition, the latter can also lead to friction. If left unresolved, said friction may advance to interpersonal conflict, manifesting as unethical behavior (Piezunka et al., 2018; Treviño et al., 2014). Seo and Lee (2017) explore *leader-member exchange (LMX) theory* in terms of how social exchanges impact the dynamic between leaders and their followers (i.e., dyadic relationships). Leaders who exploit their followers and colleagues alike for their personal gain (i.e., to "earn" their year-end bonus or to solidify the big promotion), ultimately toxifying the environment in which they

operate, thus eroding any semblance of a positive or productive organizational culture to the Wild West. Consequently, when leaders manipulate the emotions of their followers to supplement their individual interests, their dyadic relationships are impacted for the worse (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Vasquez et al., 2021).

Sauer et al. (2018) comments on the interplay between corporate culture and organizational behavior in terms of how this connection may cause individuals to act unethically. Conventional wisdom would suggest in some cases the individual is solely at fault; however, the way in which rewards systems are structured in corporate environments happens to entice leaders to behave immorally and to promote their personal interests (Gürlek, 2021). In which case, is it a matter of one or two "bad apples" or rather a "bad barrel" all together? Niven and Healy (2016) suggest that goal setting may have an adverse effect on the actions of employees. Their study found that participants with a clearly defined objective were more apt to engage in unethical behavior, or at the very least, condone the activity. Nonetheless, as productivity increases and both individual and organizational performance is on the rise, individual codes of ethics seem to diminish, at least to an extent (Barsky, 2008). Feeling the pressure to perform, leaders are likely tempted to succeed by any means necessary and at the expense of their subordinates and colleagues alike. In fact, according to KPMG's 2013 Integrity Survey, which called on the individual experiences of more than 3,500 people working in the United States, participants asserted that unethical behavior in the workplace is a biproduct of "systems that rewarded results over means" (Forensic, 2013, p. 1). Consequently, the organization or "bad barrel" may hold the lion share of the blame.

Summary

As we have come to find through this discussion of behavioral ethics, the actions of self-serving leaders are likely the result of a number of things, including the human quotient, one's proclivity to elevate one's career which is in part catalyzed by an organization's culture and the unexpected drawbacks of corporate rewards systems. That, and the individualistic nature of Western society (Lukes, 2006), which is a topic to be considered for future studies. To their credit, leaders who abuse their power should not bear the full brunt of the blame. After all, they are simply leveraging the resources they have been afforded, while attempting to navigate the complexities and politics of global corporate environments. Leaders compete for scarce resources and opportunities for growth, which are perhaps two of the many sources of self-serving behavior in the workplace. Furthermore, might one presume that the actions which contradict an organization's common interest are the consequences of having to navigate through and compete within a so-called "bad barrel?" When the environments in which leaders operate lack accountability measures, they are more likely to abuse their power for personal gain (Northouse, 2021). Based on the concept of a common morality, lapses in moral judgment should be scarce. Although people should be held accountable for their actions, especially those which cause harm, might it be beneficial to allow for reasonable exceptions due to human limitation? Humans are fickle beings conflicted by prosocial and antisocial stimuli. Sometimes, leaders decide to oblige the latter to suit their needs, which to them might be justifiable in terms of ethical egoism. In that case, McDowell (1994) would argue that measures should be taken to identify and discern the "justifiable" defenses of self-serving behavior to better understand the potential causes (p. 158).

Nevertheless, much of the current literature on leader self-serving behavior has been developed and presented through quantitative means. As a result, this study answered the call of Rus et al. (2012) with its attempt to narrow the gap in the literature by furthering the conversation of leader self-serving behavior and its causes, but from a qualitative perspective. With these findings, it might be possible to counteract ethical fading in such a way that mitigates leader self-serving behavior, or at the very least, bring forth to conscious mind the err of one's self-serving ways (Einarsen et al., 2017; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004).

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Design

The primary goal of this phenomenological study was to better understand the determinants of leader self-serving behavior, especially that which negatively impacts one's direct reports, but also organizational performance at large. As previously stated, much of the current literature regarding leader self-serving behavior has been analyzed through quantitative studies. Quantitative research is supplemented by statistical analysis to examine the correlations and/or variances between variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research, however, seeks answers to life's questions through human interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Those who adopt qualitative methods do so to uncover the deeper meaning behind what is discovered in quantitative research, while pursuing the outliers which may have been otherwise overlooked (Lune & Berg, 2017). These exceptions may be the very things that drive the philosophical breakthroughs, and paradigm shifts that change the ways in which society views a particular phenomenon. Qualitative research enables us to consider social issues at a human level. Viewing

a person's feelings or experiences through a statistical lens can sometimes be quite reductive and tell an incomplete story (Mills, 1959). Therefore, a phenomenological approach was adopted to aid the researcher in better understanding who or what influences leaders to act selfishly to advance their careers.

Phenomenology unearths the manifestations of the human experience through intimate conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Tymieniecka, 2002). Something as black and white as a Likert scale survey does not allow people to tell their side of the story. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) assert that interviews enable researchers to "understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world" (p. 3). Bearing witness to what might be considered an immoral act may be rather difficult for some people to openly discuss. While the latter data may not exactly be quantifiable, it provides much needed context.

Researcher Bias

A more tactile and perhaps overlooked instrument in this study or any qualitative study, for that matter, is indeed the researcher who, like the participants, is riddled with variable emotions. Upon further reflection and to that end, this body of research may in fact be a synthesized culmination of the researcher's past experiences. Said experiences are those in which the researcher had personally witnessed their leadership engage in self-serving behavior to advance their individual or collective professional development.

While researchers do their best to bracket themselves to prevent overextensions of opinion, bias, and the like, "our readers have a right to know about us," as well as "what prompts our interest in the topics we investigate, to whom we are reporting, and what we personally stand to gain from our study" (Wolcott, 2010, p. 36). In turn, researchers must acknowledge their

impact on and role in the study. That said, the researcher is a millennial who had come from

humble beginnings. The child of a carpenter and once administrative assistant, the researcher has

had to work for most everything in their life. In the process, the researcher learned the value of a

dollar during many an honest day's work. Perhaps toiling through the dog days of summer is

what drove the researcher to advance their education. Along the way, the researcher earned a job

in Corporate America, a place in which, from the opinion of the researcher, is plagued by greed.

Thus, this study.

As is expected, the primary driver of this study was the principal researcher's thorough

interest in better understanding the phenomenon in question. The researcher's bias is an amalgam

of past experiences, trials and tribulations, and in a matter of speaking: self-pity. In this case,

self-pity is in reference to feelings of discomfort in the face of adversity on the quest for success,

enlightenment, and genuine happiness. Working in Corporate America, or any other professional

setting, whether that is academia, non-profit organizations, or any other "business entity,"

employees will have experienced their fair share of "healthy" competition (Marino and Zabojnik,

2004).

Presumably, we all, including the researcher, have experienced the negativity that stems

from a leader's decision to engage in self-serving behavior. Although practically impossible, it

was the researcher's intent to disallow these biases from creeping into conversation to prevent

possible indoctrination, which would then skew the data collected in the interview process.

While the researcher's role in the study has been acknowledged, minimal interjection had taken

place to prevent unintended influence. That said, the researcher approached this study with the

belief that all are driven by self-interest, which is not inherently negative. Although the latter

caveat may be true, the researcher also insists that we all are more than capable of indulging our

self-serving impulses to promote person gain with little to no regard for how one's actions may harm another. With that in mind, selfishness may not exactly be an innate quality, but rather, a response to the competitive landscape (i.e., Corporate America) in which one lives and conducts business. Perhaps people are not so much "bad apples," but rather, perfectly fine fruit stored in a morally flawed "bad barrel." Furthermore, the purpose of this study was not to validate the researcher's perspective and opinions as they relate to human behavior. Conversely and more importantly, it was to better understand the behavior itself, to possibly counteract and/or prevent future, undue harm.

Since these individuals were recruited from the researcher's personal and professional networks, it is certainly possible that the responses each person provided may have been biased to support what may be presumed to be the perspective of the researcher. In other words, the participants may have tailored their responses to align with what they might assume to be the opinion the researcher has of the phenomenon, leader self-serving behavior. As in, to aid, through confirmation bias, the efforts of their colleague. People tend to engage in *social desirability bias* to present themselves in a positive light and to curtail judgment (Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

Participants

As the aim of this study was to better understand the influences of leader self-serving behavior, the target population was working professionals with current or prior leadership experience. Although the latter would be the preferred sample population, the researcher acknowledges the fact that it would be rather difficult for someone (i.e., a self-serving leader) to personally acknowledge their wrongdoings. With that in mind, this study focused on the lived experiences of employees who have or currently report to an individual or team who engages in

leader self-serving behavior. They could work in the public or private sector, in any industry. Because there is limited qualitative research on the topic, the idea was to broaden the prospective participant pool to promote a heterogenous group of individuals for their support.

Due to the fact that it was challenging to find individuals who are comfortable discussing their experiences with or acknowledging their engagement in leader self-serving behavior, the researcher employed a purposeful and snowball sample to gain participants. One, because participants should be able to speak about first-hand experience with the phenomenon, and two, because not everyone may be willing to speak openly about their trauma. Connecting with individuals (i.e., employees affected by the self-serving behavior of their direct managers) on a personal level creates an environment in which it is okay to be vulnerable and to share one's experiences with the phenomenon. While this technique increased the likelihood of participation and engagement, it is likely that it also impacted sampling validity (Terrell, 2022). Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that 5-25 individual interviews should be conducted to supplement a phenomenological study, which the researcher narrowed to 15-25 participants, or until saturation of the construct is obtained, to support this body of research. Ultimately, nineteen individuals consented to participate. To recruit these individuals, the researcher's professional network was contacted. While every precaution was taken to maintain confidentiality, the researcher wanted to create an environment in which participants could speak freely and without fear of judgment.

Inclusion Criteria

At a minimum, each participant was required to have attained a high school diploma or equivalent. In addition, participants must have prior or current professional experience during which they have or currently report to an individual who, in their opinion, shows signs of and/or engages in leader self-serving behavior. The age requirement to participate in this study was 18

years or older or of legal adult age in their jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the researcher targeted

people aged twenty-two and older, because it was presumed that the latter demographic would

have gained more life experience than someone who just graduated high school. While gender

was not an inclusion criterion, it was collected as the potential similarities and/or differences in

experience of male versus female leaders could be considered during future research

opportunities.

Exclusion Criteria

The exclusion criteria for this study were participants who do not have current or prior

experience reporting to an individual who exhibits leader self-serving behavior. Additionally, the

researcher contemplated whether to exclude participants who make it known that they have a

diagnosed mental illness. Because participants were asked to discuss sensitive, emotionally-

charged matters, the researcher believed that their conversations might unearth past traumas, and

the researcher preferred to not add to their struggles. That said, none of the participants raised

any concerns to the researcher.

Recruitment

The researcher recruited participants through various mediums (i.e., email, in-person

communication, telephone, and snowball sampling. No organizations assisted with recruitment.

As prospective participants were from the researcher's professional network, some of their

private emails were known to the researcher. In these cases, the researcher reached out directly to

each prospective participant on an individual basis at their private email address using the email

recruitment message template as approved by Marywood University's Exempt Review

Committee (see Appendix A). If the prospective participant's private email address was

unknown to the researcher, the researcher requested it through in-person communication in a

public place or via telephone. Upon receipt, the recruitment email was sent directly to the

prospective participant's private email address. For in-person recruitment, the researcher

discussed the study with participants to gauge their interest and followed-up with the recruitment

email and informed consent form for further review and consideration. These conversations were

held in a public place between the prospective participant and the researcher. The process for

telephone recruitment was the same as email-based recruitment. For snowball sampling, the

researcher provided information to prospective and existing participants and encouraged them to

pass it on to others who might be interested or eligible. This information was the approved initial

email message and informed consent form. Prospective participants could then contact the

researcher directly at the researcher's private email account for more information and possible

inclusion. The researcher provided a disclaimer to anyone who decided to pass along information

to others who might be interested or eligible to refrain from becoming engaged in research

activities by thoroughly explaining or answering questions about the study.

Once consent was obtained through verbal or textual confirmation, the ERC informed

consent form as approved by Marywood University's Exempt Review Committee (see Appendix

B) was attached to the formal recruitment email that was sent to the consenting participant. Upon

the successful receipt of each participant's signed informed consent form, the researcher began to

coordinate and schedule the subsequent interviews. Due to the state of the world in which we

currently live, the individual interviews had taken place via video call in the comfort and privacy

of one's home and last approximately forty-five minutes. Each interview was guided by the

interview protocol.

Instruments

The questions found in the interview protocol as approved by Marywood University's Exempt Review Committee (see Appendix C) have been formulated to learn more about each participant's personal lived experiences with leader self-serving behavior during their time working in a corporate environment. At the very least, the interview protocol acted as a conversational guide from which the discussion evolved. If the conversation had taken an unexpected turn, then so be it, because in qualitative research outliers are welcomed and explored. That said, the design of the interview protocol and the questions it entails may have not accurately depicted the lived experiences of the study's participants, impacting item validity (Terrell, 2022). In short, there may have been better questions posed to uncover the true meaning of one's experiences. Consequently, a professional review from an individual with a master's degree or higher in a related field and who is not affiliated with this study was conducted to confirm content validity (see Appendix D).

The researcher intended to structure the interviews to promote unencumbered dialogue. Simply, it was meant to be less an interrogation and more of a free-flowing discussion to better understand their individual perspectives in relation to the phenomenon of leader self-serving behavior. A series of probing questions were asked to gain insight into what they have witnessed, endured, and perhaps overcome in the corporate world. For instance, the researcher wanted to explore the occurrences in which the participants had been negatively impacted by a colleague or leader's self-serving behavior in terms of the emotional implications or the impact to both their personal and professional lives. Assuming at least some of the participants had lost employment as a result of the latter, the researcher hoped to provide them the opportunity to tell their side of the story, ridding them of the burden of "failure." From the perspective of the researcher, these

interview topics served multiple purposes. Not only did the study benefit from the collection of

empirical data in relation to the phenomenon of leader self-serving behavior, but the hope was

that this process also served as a cathartic experience for all involved. According to expert

opinion, the principal researcher tends to be the primary instrument in qualitative studies (Wa-

Mbaleka, 2019). In this case, the researcher positioned themself as a sort of confidant for the

participants or a facilitator of catharsis. The idea was to give a voice to the voiceless (i.e., those

who feel as though they cannot tell their story for fear of judgment and the like). Nevertheless,

the potential risks or discomforts to participating subjects were no more than those experienced

in daily life or activities.

Ethical Considerations

Autonomy. All subjects who consented to participate in this study were unencumbered to

act on their own volition. Coercion was neither be exercised nor tolerated. To supplement the

recruiting process, the researcher gained the consent of nineteen individuals, across various

demographics, per the inclusion criteria listed earlier. An introduction email was sent to

prospective subjects to entice them to participate in this study. With the informed consent form

attached, the email provided the recipient a general understanding of the purpose of the study,

what was to be expected if they decided to participate, along with the perceived benefits and

possible risks associated, and it was reiterated that it would have been perfectly acceptable to

withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason (Patten & Newhart, 2017).

Beneficence. At its core, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to promote

societal welfare, which was supported through the collection of empirical data. Founded on

utilitarian ideals, this study was designed to maximize the benefits, while minimizing the harm

done to all involved. Subjects were carefully selected to create a heterogenous group to promote

desired outcomes in terms of developing a thick, rich description of what influences leaders to

engage in self-serving behavior. As a result, it was difficult to circumvent the need to gather

individually identifying data which poses a risk to both the participant and the investigator.

Nevertheless, every precaution was taken to de-identify consenting participants to maintain

confidentiality, due to the nature of this study. For example, all communication had taken place

through personal mediums (e.g., one's personal cell phone and/or email). No participants were

contacted at work or via any mode of communication associated with one's place of

employment. The researcher recommended that subjects participate on a personal computer in a

secure location to prevent unforeseen data transmission on a company server. It was the

assumption of the researcher that this study's participants would prefer to have their experiences

with possible unethical actions kept private. All digital records were kept in a secure location on

a password protected computer. Records will be kept for three years and subsequently deleted.

As this study required individuals to introspect, the interview was structured to encourage

enlightenment, while preventing undue psychological and emotional distress. The researcher

took care to refrain from the use of emotionally triggering language, while evoking feelings of

inclusion. The contact information of Marywood University's Psychological Services Center was

provided on the informed consent form and reconfirmed at the beginning and end of the

interview, should participants experience distress of any kind.

Justice. Individuals from vulnerable populations were not represented in this study.

Regardless of the relationship between researcher and subject, all involved were treated

equitably and devoid of exploitation (Patten & Newhart, 2017). Each participant received the

same correspondence throughout the entire process. An initial outreach email template was

developed, identical informed consent forms were delivered electronically, and participants were

asked the same series of questions. In addition, there was absolutely no payment for participation. The only tangible takeaway one may have received is a heightened self-awareness, as well as the propensity to continue the conversation with one's personal network. Nevertheless, the benefits of this study were not retained to just the participant group.

Procedures

With minimal risk, human beings acted as subjects in this study, so Exempt Review Committee (ERC) approval was required (Patten & Newhart, 2017). Consequently, the researcher submitted a proposal to the ERC at Marywood University for review and subsequent approval which was granted (see Appendix E). Upon approval, the researcher engaged in purposeful sampling to recruit qualified candidates per the inclusion criteria listed in the Participants section of this body of work. The researcher called on their personal and professional networks to ask for their support. Various forms of communication (e.g., email, in-person, and phone) were leveraged to connect with prospective subjects to introduce them to the study before requesting their participation. During those conversations, the researcher provided information to prospective participants and encouraged them to pass it on to others who might be interested or eligible. This information was the approved recruitment email and informed consent form. Prospective participants were then given the opportunity to contact the researcher directly for more information and possible inclusion. The researcher provided a disclaimer to anyone who decided to pass along information to others who might be interested or eligible to refrain from becoming engaged in research activities by thoroughly explaining or answering questions about the study

At any rate, when verbal albeit informal consent was obtained, the researcher proceeded to send a follow-up email that summarizes the key points of their conversation, with an informed

consent form attached. The prospective participant was asked to return the informed consent form to the researcher to document his or her willingness to participate and permission to proceed. All signed informed consent forms were stored on a password-protected personal computer to maintain confidentiality and to protect each participant's privacy.

As signed informed consent forms were received, the researcher followed-up with each consenting participant to coordinate interview times. While it may be optimal to meet in-person, the latter is not always feasible, for a multitude of reasons (e.g., perhaps the participant may feel uncomfortable speaking about past experiences in a public place among nosy passersby, or maybe the researcher and participant are not geologically adjacent, so a virtual interview just makes sense). Furthermore, it is best practice to select an interview venue that promotes emotional security for consenting participants (Morris, 2015). Consequently, the researcher suggested that the interview should be conducted virtually, via Zoom, and in the privacy of their own homes. It is the researcher's belief that virtual interviews fulfill one's need for face-to-face communication, to help build rapport, while respecting the privacy of the participant, as the interview would be conducted in a safe place, devoid of eavesdroppers. Nevertheless, it is imperative that both parties maintain a mutual respect and understanding throughout the process. If an interview day and/or time must be rescheduled, then so be it. It is the responsibility of the researcher to make the interview process as simple as possible for the participant in terms of convenience, to promote quality data collection.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher reconfirmed the subject's consent to participate in the study before further building rapport to establish an environment in which the participant felt comfortable to speak freely. Necessary demographic information was collected but did not serve as a barrier to entry to ensure a variety of perspectives and experiences were

captured and illuminated. An agenda was set to ensure both the researcher and participant are aligned in terms of expectations, including the researcher's reminder to participants to refrain from providing such details that identify places, persons, or entities to maintain confidentiality. The researcher reiterated the purpose of the study and its central research question before proceeding to ask a series of interview questions to better understand the participant's lived experiences with the phenomenon. The researcher adopted the 80/20 approach, with an intent to speak 20% of the time, leaving the remaining 80% of the time. The researcher intended to pose each question in an intelligible manner to promote the participant's understanding of and engagement in the study. Again, the idea was for the participant to share their lived experiences as they relate to being personally affected by leader self-serving behavior. If at any time the researcher believed the participant did not understand the meaning of the question, the researcher simply rephrased the question while maintaining the same meaning. If at any time the researcher deemed clarification of a response fit, follow-up questions were posed. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were thanked for their time, upon which the researcher discussed next steps, including that all personal information will be promptly de-identified.

Data Analysis

As per the recommendation of van Manen (1990), each interview was audio and video recorded, with each participant's consent, to aid with transcription and to support the data analysis portion of this study. The researcher's ability to review a video recording only helped the study, as it is possible to overlook nonverbal communication in the moment, especially as one is busy taking notes. With each participant's consent, the interview was transcribed using Zoom's interview transcript function. All recordings and transcriptions were securely stored on a

password-protected personal computer under the veil of a participant-specific pseudonym (e.g., Participant A).

To begin the data analysis process, the researcher simply read the transcripts at least twice to become familiar with the overall sentiment of what had been discussed. Upon the initial review(s), further iterations of analysis had taken place to develop codes, code books, and corresponding themes between each participant's responses. It was the researcher's hope that enough codes and/or themes could be thoroughly developed to cultivate a foundational understanding of the influences of leader self-serving behavior in the workplace. From there, the researcher drew conclusions about what influences leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement the ideation of practical recommendations on how to prevent the behavior in the future. The data analysis process was supported by Creswell and Poth's (2018) simplification of Moustakas' (1994) original modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (see Appendix F).

Validity

Contrary to quantitative research, which is supported by quantifiable, sometimes precisely measurable statistical analysis, qualitative research, specifically phenomenological studies, are driven by the interplay between human emotion and one's lived experiences. As no two people are exactly alike in terms of how they react to emotional stimuli, especially that which correspond to one's lived experiences, it may be difficult for researchers to develop cohesive interpretations of the data (Harris, 2010). As a result, the validity of one's research may be in question. Validity in qualitative studies, however, is fostered by meticulous researchers who approach their work with a certain veracity driven by standard procedure (Gibbs, 2007).

Although principal investigators assert themselves as the primary instruments in phenomenological studies, their research would be for nothing without their participants and

subsequent readers. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), *internal validity* in qualitative

research is found when the latter trio reaches a consensus in terms of the relationship between the

researcher's findings and the data collected. Both the researcher and participant agreed that the

researcher's conclusions accurately depicted the participant's individual experience.

     Reflexivity. While the researcher's bias has already been brought to the forefront in the

Instruments section of this body of work, *reflexivity*, or the researcher's acknowledgement of

their role in the research, helps to promote internal validity in their respective studies (Creswell

& Creswell, 2018). The way in which the researcher approached this study, in terms of how they

collected and interpreted the data, was relative and specific to the individual. The researcher sees

the world from a distinct lens, which may be unlike or quite different from that of another. In

turn, one's authenticity and adherence to remaining intentional validates one's research.

     Member Checking. To promote internal validity, the researcher provided participants

the opportunity to review the field notes gathered during the interview to ensure information was

recorded and aligned with the sentiment of the participant's experience to hopefully triangulate

the data. Additionally, the subsequent transcriptions were also be shared with the participants to

further confirm that the annotations and connotations of their responses correspond, especially

because the written word is sometimes easily misinterpreted. Furthermore, we are all capable of

getting "caught up in the moment," in which one might misspeak or utter something one does not

necessarily believe. For some of the participants, this may have been a rather difficult discussion

to have. It was an instance in which they were asked to be transparent, which may leave some

feeling vulnerable. When vulnerable, it is understandable for one to become emotional and fail to

think or articulate clearly. Thus, the need for the study's participants to review the data in

conjunction with learning more about the researcher's conclusions that have been supplemented

by the researcher's interpretation of the data collected. During this process, the participants can

address any discrepancies found in their review to provide context and clarification, if necessary.

If both the researcher and the study's participants are aligned, it is to be assumed that readers

would consider the data credible and authentic. Moreover, the researcher's committee was

involved along the way to audit process, procedure, and the accuracy or credibility of the study's

findings.

   Generalizability. To make this body of work easily replicable, the researcher has noted

the stepwise procedure in which the data was collected, while sharing the exact interview

protocol that was used to supplement the interview process. The idea is that if one were to use

this study as a framework for future research to further understand the influences of leader self-

serving behavior, that the interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations of this study would

serve as a foundational launching pad. Furthermore, the researcher crafted a description of the

codes and themes developed in the data analysis portion of this study to confer their findings and

to offer insight for future research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

   In addition, the inclusion criteria found in this study were intentionally limited to promote

generalizability and to foster external validity. If the participants in this study account for a broad

range of demographics, it is presumable that their shared lived experience may be relative. In any

event, this study could be used as an example of what to do or not to do in future research.

Reliability

   Yin (2015) suggests that documentation is key to reinforce reliability in qualitative

research. With that in mind, the researcher intended to promote reliability in this study similarly

to the way in which validity has been established. The researcher was as detailed as possible in

their explanations of procedure and protocol to ensure the process can be followed and easily

understood. To prevent human error in the transcription process, the researcher employed the services of a third party (i.e., Zoom's transcription software) to accurately transcribe the audio recordings of each interview.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

The intent of this qualitative study using a phenomenological approach was to expand upon what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement in global organizations. A series of interview questions were developed to explore the connections between the current literature and the lived experiences of those who have been exposed to the phenomenon. They were formulated to answer the central question, which provides insight into the perspectives of those who have been directly impacted by leader self-serving behavior to draw conclusions with respect to: (1) What internal factors (i.e., egoism, the dark tetrad, and/or moral development) may tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace?; and (2) What external factors (i.e., organizational culture and/or corporate rewards systems) may tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace The researcher reviewed each transcription individually and as a whole to identify commonalities among the collection of responses that eventually transformed into a list of corresponding codes. The researcher analyzed said codes to identify and develop themes related to what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement in global organizations.

Participants

Nineteen individuals voluntarily participated in this research study. Although demographics did not serve as inclusion criteria for this study, they were collected to ensure a variety of perspectives and experiences were captured and illuminated (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Information of Study Participants

Demographics	Sub-Category	Frequency (n)
Gender	Male Female	12 7
Age	25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65+	16 2 1
Race/Ethnicity	White Black or African American Hispanic or Latino	14 2 3
Education	High School Graduate Associate's Degree Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree Doctorate	2 1 6 7 3
Years of Experience	< 1 year 1-3 years 4-5 years 6-10 years 10+ years	0 0 0 11 8
Experience Level	Associate Mid-Senior	8 11
Geographic Region of US	Northeast Mid-Atlantic Southeast Midwest Mountain West	1 15 1 1 1

The following industries were represented by the study' participants: retail trade, manufacturing, energy, logistics, education, consulting, staffing and recruiting, law, healthcare, engineering, professional services, intelligence, technology, municipal services, and entertainment. In addition to the participant's demographic information, the researcher asked each participant to share their supervisor's (the self-serving leader) gender, age, years of leadership experience, and geographic location (see Table 2).

Table 2: Demographic Information of Study Participants' Self-Serving Leaders

Demographics	Sub-Category	Frequency (n)
Gender	Male Female	15 4
Age	25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65+	 8 8 2 1
Years of Leadership Experience	< 1 year 1-3 years 4-5 years 6-10 years 10+ years	 3 3 3 10
Geographic Region of US	Northeast Mid-Atlantic Midwest West South Central Mountain West Pacific	3 11 1 1 2 1

The Lived Experience of Employees Affected by Leader Self-Serving Behavior

The interview protocol was designed to afford each participant an opportunity to share their individual lived experiences with leader self-serving behavior. While they come from diverse backgrounds, work in different industries, and in different capacities, a number of their

stories shared the same sentiments. Commonalities among their collective responses were

identified and emerged as four main themes, with all four of these themes bearing subthemes.

Table 3: Definitions of Themes and Subthemes Related to Bad Apple's Stance

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Character Flaws		The defective personality traits shared by self-serving leaders
	Lack of Human Connection	A leader's emotional detachment from their subordinates and/or colleagues
	Calculated Chaos	Leader self-serving behavior is premeditated and backed by intention
	Keeping Up with the Joneses	Plagued by things like vanity, greed, and pride, self-serving leaders may stop at nothing to reach the upper echelon of the social strata
Naturally Selfish		Self-serving leaders are driven by an innate selfishness to promote their personal interests
	Responsibility Evasion	Self-serving leaders neglect their responsibilities as a leader to prioritize the promotion of personal interests

Character Flaws

On the whole, it appeared that each participant's leader was plagued by the dark tetrad in

at least one way, shape, or form, influencing their personality traits and character flaws.

Participant L believed their leader's self-serving behavior was driven by their

"personality…money and power" because "I think the more you advance, the more money and

the more power you have…kind of changes the person…you become more power hungry." It is

curious if these behavior changes are more prevalent in those who had grown up, as Participant

K mentioned, "not being heard," or as Participant P had put it, "feeling like they have not gotten

what they deserve." To that end, Participant P added, "It is a power dynamic to say, 'Hey, I'm the

boss where I work.". Perhaps these individuals had grown up feeling inadequate or inferior, therefore an acquisition of power might be a shock to their ego. Similarly, Participant Q's leader "made it known that they were the manager…They created a power imbalance [to create] a divide."

Participant J claimed, "This person was definitely a narcissist; mix in [some] Machiavellian [tendencies]," which led to Participant J experiencing "verbal abuse" and "threats of violence" due to their performance, Participant J's leader deemed unsatisfactory. Additionally, Participant J described their leader as manipulative and held no qualms about using his subordinates as means to his self-serving ends. According to Participant N, their leader was, "A person that you don't want to share full details with because you don't know how it [will] affect you… [He is] a snake in the grass…He likes when people stroke his ego." Similarly, Participant A stated that their leader harbored "personality traits like narcissism, a desire for control, and to manipulate to gain control." Not only did their leader maintain control as a form of self-preservation, but it also turns out, at least from Participant A's perspective, that this was just an integral component of their leader's personality. From Participant E's perspective, their leader's self-serving behavior stems from their:

> Limited self-control. They have difficulty waiting to get a result themselves, so they are willing to engage in what we might deem bad behaviors or negative behaviors…to gain access to the results they want faster, even if it is not an ethical way or might put someone else down.

Participant O talked about their leader's destructive leadership style in terms of bullying his subordinates to assert his dominance as their superior:

They were extremely arrogant…extremely rude, even when someone was being nice to

them…the individual would continue to just be rude, off putting, and [was] constantly

putting people down. [They asked] a lot of rhetorical questions even though…he knew

the answers to all of them…just to make the person…feel inferior. There is a certain

complex that the individual had to remind everyone that they were the smartest person in

the room.

Perhaps this overt rudeness and arrogance served as a coping mechanism for Participant O's

leader, or even a means to offer themselves psychological safety to mask their insecurities. Based

on additional probing, Participant O mentioned that their leader created a division between

himself and his subordinates to make it known that he is in charge and holds the power. To that,

Participant O added:

It could be a history of him growing up being insecure about their status as who they are

inside, really. [The cause of his behavior] could be a multitude of things, but for this case,

I assume it was insecurity and vanity.

Lack of Human Connection. When analyzing the lived experiences of individuals who

have directly reported to and/or collaborated with self-serving leaders, one sub-theme emerged

around a lack of human connection. To start, Participant R was rather concise with their

statement of: "Employees are numbers. In a practical sense, organizational cultures lack a human

component." From this perspective, one might presume that organizational cultures are founded

on empty promises of promoting employee well-being. To that, Participant I added:

[Working for] companies that are global, it is really easy to get lost as an employee. You

are just a number; you are just a worker and there is no connection. You do not know

what you do not know and sometimes if you do not have that connection with [your]

leader…at the end of the day, that person cannot really feel for you.

Like the rest, Participant I's leader was more concerned about gaining and maintaining control

over their employees:

I do not think he likes to feel like he is losing control. He wants to make sure he is in

control…My leader is very task-oriented and wants to keep track of everything that is

going on…He does not like to be caught by surprise…I feel like he does this because he

does not want to feel like he is losing control over the person he is leading.

Participant I mentioned something prior which the researcher considered a potential cause of this

leader's apathetic behavior: "I honestly think they [the leader] lack love, personal love, because I

feel like if you don't have love towards you, you obviously can't love those around you." Perhaps

this "lack of love" has desensitized Participant I's leader to the point where they view humans as

tools, rather than sentient beings that require care and attention. Sharing a similar experience,

Participant K felt an emotional disconnect from their leader, which limits the success of dyadic

relationships. They expressed that their leader, too, lacked empathy, soft skills, and was highly

task-oriented:

I would describe her as analytical, and that is how she approaches conversations, as well.

It [conversations] lacks emotion and connections. There is no commonality that she

builds with her employees. But she is a great analytical, business acumen type of mind.

She misses that mark on people management.

Like the others, Participant C shared one of their many experiences involving their leader's lack

of empathy and inability to appropriately administer feedback in terms of "not caring how [their]

words come across to other people." Offering an example, Participant C recalled, "I had made an

error on [a] file and was told, 'This cannot happen again. This will not happen again.' In my

mind, which means I am going to get fired if this happens again." Participant C proceeded to

share that their work style has changed not only from this encounter but also the time they had

collaborated with this particular leader:

> Here we are, years after the fact and now that is in my head always and it is absolutely
>
> affected my work…I do not want to stick my head out and go above and beyond
>
> because…the more I do, the more things could be wrong with what I did.

Participant C continued with:

> I understand there is a sense of authority that a manager has over someone, but it should
>
> not be imposed. Those things [impositions of authority] make people feel a certain way
>
> and it does not lead to better work…It leads to less work and the same errors are still
>
> there.

Furthermore, Participant C shared their belief that this lack of empathy may stem from the lonely

journey of climbing the corporate ladder. They presumed that as individuals progress in their

careers, their social circle shrinks:

> From my experiences, I would say that it is probably inversely related…as career
>
> advancement increases, friendships probably decrease. It is a function of stress and
>
> pressure. Of course, if you are in charge of two-hundred people and billions of dollars of
>
> assets or revenue…you are going to be more stressed out, maybe you just want to sit at
>
> home and do nothing. So, I would say that as career advancement increases, I think that if
>
> they did value their relationships that much, they probably would not have taken those
>
> roles to begin with because of the demand.

Participant S shared their thoughts on what might cause someone to lack empathy, especially in terms of considering how one's actions might negatively impact another:

> I just think people do not understand unless they have been in a situation where they have been taken advantage of or had been on the receiving end of it [self-serving behavior]. They do not necessarily look at their decision making as having that effect like; I do not think they are purposely saying, 'Oh, yeah, I'm going to be selfish in this decision.'

Participant P added that leaders "would definitely feel much more of that guilt" when exploiting employees or colleagues with whom they shared "personal relationships."

Calculated Chaos. Fourteen participants asserted that leader self-serving behavior is premeditated or intentional, while one participant believed that it occurs randomly, and the remaining four thought it depends on the person or situation. Participant B said that their leader's selfish behaviors both served and were also governed by a "premeditated or planned long term goal." Participant L also believed that leader self-serving behavior is calculated and intentional. Reverting back to the subtheme of self-preservation, they believed a leader's decision to engage in self-serving behavior is because "they have a necessity to survive…to secure long-term [career] growth, for the sustainability of their company" to afford themselves job security. Participant G shared an example from their experience in which their leader exploited one of their subordinates for their personal gain:

> The best one [example] of recent, where somebody was not on a performance plan…we are picking up in business, and out of nowhere, their role was found redundant and the work is doubled…It was because of a popularity contest where people [senior leadership] didn't like somebody [the individual who was terminated] and yet, things look great my

leader…lower cost to the team [organization] or higher production from less people…and they're in great standing with [their leadership].

Participant G affirmed their belief that all that had transpired was planned and malicious. Participant D's response alluded to the acts of self-deception self-serving leaders commit to justify their immoral behavior. "He intends to do it…he is the type of person that is in denial of it. [He is] aware of what he does, and he almost uses tactics to justify [his behavior] in his own head." Participant A, who had mentioned that selfishness was an ingrained and integral component of their leader's personality, was a member of the majority group. While one can try to give another the benefit of the doubt, an individual's behavior often validates who they are as a person. Participant A stated that their leader "worked tirelessly to produce an outcome of what their leadership wanted" to a point in which it became "self-harming – working so hard that you're not taking care of yourself – [he] set his team and himself back due to [his] unrealistic expectations." Sharing a similar experience, Participant R suggested that the behavior "becomes habitual" because the success that resulted from the behavior validates it. Furthering this concept, Participant E shared:

> There was significant programming, thought, and planning [from the leader] that had to go into devising these procedures or things that put others in a harder position or elevated herself while putting down others…The results of those [selfish] behaviors have been so successful for the leader in the past…I think some of them [selfish behaviors] might just almost happen without them thinking at this point.

Participant K was one of the participants who believed that leader self-serving behavior is both pre-meditated but is also a matter of happenstance. They claimed that "It's not confrontation, but she doesn't like to be surprised or needs time to ruminate and think of a response." Therefore,

Participant K's leader affords herself time to devise a plan that results in a net benefit for herself. On the other hand, Participant K suggested that sometimes "things happen that are unforeseen" and out of our control and the way in which people respond stems from being "uneducated" or having a "lack of understanding" regarding an appropriate response to a particular situation. Similarly, Participant M believed that "In certain instances something comes up and they do not think twice, and they just need to try to fix whatever problem or perceived problem they have immediately." Now, if an individual is naturally selfish (i.e., harboring, not consciously rejecting an innate desire to promote their individual interests without regard for how their actions might negatively impact another), it is likely that their immediate emotional response is to pursue ends that only benefit them. That said, Participant M added:

> I say premeditated in that this behavior has been going on for six years and I am sure it has been going on even longer…it is not just a coincidence that they…occasionally do this. This is just consistent behavior that, premeditated… [selfish behavior] is certainly baked into their character.

Keeping Up with the Joneses. To an extent, each of the nineteen participants believed there is a correlation between feeling pressured to constantly improve one's social status and a leader's decision to engage in self-serving behavior. When asked what internal factors might tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behaviors in the workplace, Participant J's response was: "Financial security, prestige, and self-worth." Additionally, Participant J shared their belief that their leader, too, was burdened not only by capital vices, but this concept of keeping up with the Joneses:

> Oh, it has [a] tremendous impact. It is kind of like that expression: comparison is the thief of joy. That this is just a hypothetical but if you see all of your friends, all of your peers,

and all of your coworkers succeeding, achieving all these things, doing all these

things…Then you're going to probably take more moral shortcuts…and you're going to

say, 'I have got to catch up to what these people are doing and I'm going to do it by any

means necessary.' That happens all the time and I think we can always make excuses

[for] why we do things.

Sharing a similar view, Participant C added:

As time goes on and you see your peers advance [in their careers] and maybe you do not,

the word that comes to my mind is desperation. Maybe you are envious or jealous of your

peers and you start saying, 'Well, what am I doing? Why am I not also advancing?' And

again, I am no expert, but maybe you start getting desperate. You are going to try new

ways and maybe [those ways] are not as ethical or maybe not as moral as you would have

done before.

From Participant E's perspective, it depends on the individual:

If social status is something that is revered or preferred by that individual and they have

peers that they value that are in higher positions than them [that are] gaining more power

or [growing] financially, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that put themselves

in those types of positions.

Discussing the implications of when a leader's vanity clouds their judgment, Participant B stated,

"Ultimately, this person was significantly more image conscious than he was process or results

focused. It leads to disengagement. It leads to disinterest in your responsibilities that leads to

burnout…to talent attrition." For some, seeing others shine, especially when they remain

stagnant, can lead them to undermine their counterparts' accomplishments. To that end,

Participant M shared:

I have seen others take different approaches [to their career development]. It comes back

to one of your initial questions around moral development and moral foundation…I have

seen individuals at my company become successful and have wanted to emulate what

they are doing in order to hopefully have a similar level of success. There is another

individual that I have seen grow up in the company with me, who has taken a different

approach in that when others are successful, she likes to find ways to poke holes in [the

successes of others] to try to prop herself up and be seen as being successful and

minimizing other's success.

From a similar lens but in terms of a shared friend group, Participant O added:

When they see someone gaining success or fame, instead of wanting to congratulate them

for what they are doing, they think, 'How do I get that?' …Then they start doing all these

back channel kinds of things [to attain a similar result].

While corporate environments might be a breeding ground for (unhealthy) competition, the

researcher also acknowledges the fact that not everyone who advances their career does so

through immoral means. That said, doing anything the "right" way is a process and does not

happen overnight. To that end, Participant N noted:

I think not a lot of people like when [other] people are getting promotions. [However],

they are not really looking into, 'What kind of background does this person have or

where they are coming from?' They have to do what they have to do to get into a

business and then maybe they get promoted. Sometimes you see people get promoted

more quickly and then you are like, 'Oh man, that should be me,' without realizing, well,

this person actually took a lower title to come here, you never know the situation. For me,

I can sometimes get frustrated if I don't think I'm growing as much as others, but I also

don't know their role [or] their experience inside out, so I think it's more like I don't try to

compare myself to others, but I can see other managers getting really frustrated, wanting

to leave a company because they don't feel like they're growing, but some parts of the

business grow quicker than others.

As a society, we are more socially connected than we have ever been before and whether we like

to admit it, people tend to compare themselves to other people. According to Participant G:

I think [when] the majority of people look around a room they do not want to be seen as

lesser than someone else. They do not want to be seen as, 'Hey, I'm not doing as well as

somebody else or they're doing better than me.' Everybody wants to be at the top of that

list with successful people.

To that end, a majority of the participants aligned on the idea that an insatiable desire to succeed

may lead individuals to engage in immoral behavior to "keep up with the Joneses." Combine the

latter with a self-serving leader's emotional detachment from their subordinates and/or

colleagues (i.e., lack of human connection) and, as the participants would suggest, calculated

chaos will ensue. Character flaws like these are a common thread to support the bad apples

stance of the bad apples versus bad argument involving leader self-serving behavior.

Naturally Selfish

Overall, each participant considered selfishness from a similar lens and produced a

homogenous definition of the term (i.e., pursuing one's personal interests irrespective of how

one's actions might negatively affect another). Fourteen of the participants suggested that it is

human nature to be selfish and a contributing factor to a leader's decision to engage in self-

serving behavior. While these participants believed it is instinctual for humans to behave

selfishly, five participants believed that selfishness is instead a learned behavior dictated by the

external pressures brought on by one's environment. This perspective would suggest that

selfishness is a reactive behavior and a means for individuals to cope with their surroundings to

succeed no matter the circumstance. According to Participant B, an example of external

pressures might be:

> The way that incentive plans are constructed, regardless of function and regardless of the
>
> components within that incentive plan, is driving a focus on selfish targets. We focus on
>
> what we are incentivized to focus on, as human beings, and some of that is
>
> unintentionally selfish.

When asked what might cause someone (i.e., a self-serving leader) to behave selfishly,

Participant J suggested that quests for "any scarcity, any resource that is considered scarce or

valuable" prompts selfish behavior. Participants K believed that selfish behavior is the result of

"not being heard." For example, an individual may behave selfishly because they have not

received adequate support to accomplish a task, so they feel as if they are forced to take matters

into their own hands and focus solely on themselves because no one else cares to help.

Participant P mentioned that selfishness stems from a person's "feeling like they have not gotten

what they deserve," with the caveat that this belief may be unfounded and due to a lack of

awareness from the side of the "wronged." Two participants held a similar perspective in that

they felt selfishness is brought on by ego or jealousy. Participant S claimed that a self-serving

leader might "limit someone else's potential" because, as Participant Q put it, "They do not want

to see others succeed."

     Responsibility Evasion. Throughout the interviews, many of the participants expressed

their feelings about a lack of support from their leadership. Based on their responses, they had

felt as if they had no one to turn to ask questions or gain feedback. To them, it seemed like their

leaders were only present to accept praise and recognition for a job well done, when they had no

part in the work that had led to a successful outcome. Participant E's leader was quick to

delegate tasks and even quicker to take credit for the work of others:

> What often would happen is workload would be displaced to make the [leader's]
>
> workload lighter…That would be displaced to myself or other people under the leader
>
> and when those things had gone well, it would be presented as an achievement of the
>
> leaders.

Sharing a similar experience, Participant R mentioned, "Our team became stretched awfully thin

because our leader took on far too much work to impress senior leadership and his subordinates

are the ones who were affected." Because Participant R was a top performer on the team, they

were assigned responsibility for the extra work that was allocated to their "career-driven leader,"

who was an expert delegator and "didn't care how the increased workload affected his

subordinates." Like Participant E, Participant R expressed that their leader only assumed

responsibility for the work when praise was given by senior leadership.

From a slightly distinct perspective, Participant N added, "The company wasn't doing that well

[but he decided] to golf all summer, where it's like, I'm working my butt off and you're just

having a great time and I'm doing all of your work for you." Instead of offering support to help

course correct a declining business, Participant N's leader decided to leave them to fend for

themselves in a time of need. Participant B spoke about the unfocused, disorganized, and

transactional nature of their leader:

> This individual is just generally disinterested in doing anything thorough. [He is]
>
> unwilling to put the time in to have a broader understanding of the why; drive results

without having to do any at work, but also drive results without setting any clear

expectations.

Participant P discussed how their leader's lack of support had a major impact on not only

employee engagement but also customer experience:

We were severely understaffed, it made the working conditions much more dangerous

with less people around…With COVID, it made [the leader's] business much more in

demand, and as a result [the leader] made much more money. I would venture to say it

was a more profitable time than it had been in many years. As a direct result of [the

increased demand], the employees were highly stressed, fatigued, and unhappy with

working conditions, which directly affected the morale and well-being of our clientele, as

well.

Participant P had gone on to share that these concerns were brought to the attention of their

leadership, as "There needed to be better incentives to get more people on because we were

stretched very thin and working a lot of hours in a mentally fatiguing environment," but nothing

changed. The organization was profitable and from the leader's perspective, their team could *do*

more with less which equaled a cost savings for the organization, thus increasing profit margins.

Plus, hiring more people required additional time and effort, two things to which Participant P's

leader was unwilling to allocate resources. Participant P added:

He was very insulated from the actual…day to day…the things that were actually

happening. [He] was disconnected from the actual work…If it was anything that was

going to affect the bottom line, the reputation of the business, or his personal reputation,

which he was very much invested in, then he would take interest. But as far as the 'daily

happenings,' and the…comfort of the employees, or even just the safety [of the

employees] at a bare minimum…he did not take very much action.

Per the shared experiences of this study's participants, an individual's propensity to be naturally

selfish is a driver of leader self-serving behavior. At times, this innate selfishness can be

catalyzed by a leader's external pressures, which will be discussed in a later section.

Nevertheless, the data suggests that self-serving leaders will neglect their responsibilities to their

subordinates, colleagues, and organizations to promote their personal gain.

Table 4: Definitions of Themes and Subthemes Related to Bad Barrel Stance

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Situational Dependence		The stakes at hand impact a leader's decision to engage in self-serving behavior to promote their personal interests
	Self-Preservation	Leaders may engage in self-serving behavior to maintain employment and relevancy in the workplace
	Moral Limbo	A leader's internal struggle to make moral decisions due to a lack of moral development
Institutional Inefficiencies		The broken systems that contribute to and validate leader self-serving behavior in the workplace
	Misguided Incentive Plans	Flawed corporate rewards systems coupled with that lead to unfriendly competition and immoral behaviors
	Unrealistic Expectations	The pressure experienced by leaders to meet unattainable goals that foster self-serving behaviors
	Lack of Accountability	Self-serving leaders are not held accountable for their actions so long as they hit their targets and the organization is profitable

Situational Dependence

While nearly half of the participants believed that people tend to accomplish their goals through moral means, nine participants also believed that objectives are sometimes reached through self-serving means. When asked how people typically attain their goals, Participant N stated, "it is through morally just [means], but I can also argue 'what is the goal?' Because if the goal is really unrealistic, people may try to pursue selfish behaviors to attain a goal that is not

attainable." Participant B held a similar perspective and added, "[Career development] can be done within the confines of morality for sure," but also believed that "The problem is that time is a limited, resources are limited, and because of that, more often than not, people may toe those morality guidelines [principles]." To that end, depending on the circumstance or the stakes involved, individuals may alter their behaviors or act outside of their moral identities to accomplish their goals (e.g., engage in self-serving behavior to promote their individual career advancement). Participant L discussed the noticeable shift in the behaviors of their leader as they climbed the corporate ladder:

> When they started they were the leader of a small team of people. It was… 'Lead by example' … 'What's best for the team?' [They] cared about you on a personal level; took pride in your growth. As the person moved up in the organization, their focus was more on what is better for the organization and less about the folk underneath them…Their goals changed in order to advance through the company…It became more about money… 'How can you do more with less?' … 'He gave a crap about us to [only] he gave a crap about the company.'

While the latter does not indicate that a leader's morality will change as they grow in their careers, their motivations, behaviors, and treatment of employees very well might. Participant C, whose work life improved exponentially since transitioning to an organization that does not condone leader self-serving behavior, shared, "I would say as [the] size in company increases, the propensity for a manager to self-serve also increases just from the sheer volume of managers within [that] organization." Sharing a similar perspective with Participants N and B, Participant C's assertion stems from the perspective that increased competition impacts resource allocation

and career development opportunities that might tempt individuals with an underdeveloped moral identity to engage in leader self-serving behavior to promote their individual interests.

Participant J expressed that their leader lacked emotional intelligence and was disingenuous during most social interactions. The way Participant J's leader interacted with employees depended solely on how an individual performed. "If you performed well, they had a very good relationship with you. If you perform poorly, it was a bad relationship that could swing from day to day, week to week, or month to month." This type of behavior is what creates a hostile work environment that leads to a decrease in employee engagement, burnout, turnover, and the like.

Based on the interview conducted with Participant G, the executive leadership at their organization has a Theory X approach to managing people. Simply put, they have to be able to physically see their subordinates to ensure they are completing their work. In 2023, many companies began rolling out a return to office initiative and without going into too much detail, Participant G was impacted by the latter at their workplace. While there were a number of leaders at this organization pushing back against the initiative or seeking HR accommodations for their employees to maintain the level of work-life balance they had been promised when joining the organization. In Participant G's case, however, their manager neglected their duty as a leader to appease executive leadership instead of challenging the status quo because "[My] leadership turns a blind eye and picks and chooses when they want to hear things." They added, "[I] had to turn my whole life upside down because [my] leader wanted to look like they were making an impact…the result of that is a big pat on the back for middle management but an unhappy employee." Presumably, the failure to act was a form of self-preservation – that if they

challenged the status quo – perhaps they would be considered insubordinate and against the

strategic vision of the organization, thus putting a target on their back.

        Self-Preservation. Multiple participants alluded to this idea of self-preservation with

respect to their leader's self-serving behavior. Participant B, being one of them, claimed:

> I do not think people are regularly put in position to act [selfishly], but I do know that
>
> there are external pressures – whether they be implicit or explicit – that motivate
>
> individuals to act outside of their morals. From my experience, I believe most selfishness
>
> is organizationally driven, and in some cases, you get into self-preservation mode."

From this viewpoint, an organization's structure and culture drives leader self-serving behavior

to remain relevant, competitive, or simply: employed. When asked what internal factors may

tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace, Participant K responded, "For

her [their leader], it's her desire to please her leadership – not her team." This leader's act of

pleasing their leadership was used simply as a means to grow in their career. Participant K added

"it gives her job security, too…it doesn't matter what happens to [her] team along the way…but

that's the company culture." Participant I discussed their leader's "self-preserving" behavior in

terms of leader's natural instinct to maintain the life they have built:

> In my case, it is the title he carries. I have learned that my leader came from a very
>
> vulnerable background where he did not have access to the things he has now, or he did
>
> not grow up thinking that the position and title he has now was a possibility for him. I
>
> think that the title and the responsibilities he has are growing his ego and he is scared of
>
> the possibility of losing them.

Participants D and Q talked about how their leaders hoarded information to ensure they not only

kept an upper hand on their subordinates but to also provide themselves job security because

they would be the invaluable or indispensable go-to person. Participant Q mentioned, "The one thing I've learned, too, is that they like to micromanage and hoard a lot of information that could be helpful and make things easier." Presumably, Participant Q's leader engages in this behavior to track the information and resources his team was consuming, but Participant Q thought it was simply part of who they are as a person:

> It is ingrained. I do not think it just kind of came out of nowhere. I think the big issue with them – that they face mentally – [is that] they have to have control of everything, or they are afraid to let go of controlling the whole situation around them, in a way. This person does not let other people do their work because so [they were] so into it. It is like 'This is what you hired me for, so you need to trust my opinion.

Multiple participants mentioned that their leaders rejected feedback and devalued their subordinates' inputs, presumably to discourage them. From the researcher's perspective, both the latter and the former would help the self-serving leader narrow the lines of communication between their subordinates and senior leadership as a way to control the narrative that misappropriated their team's accomplishments to the leader. Top-down communications from Participant M's leadership are vague, presumptuous, and one-sided:

> They approach leadership as 'Do as I say.' They use their position as the owners of the company to mandate the [results] they want from their employees and do not necessarily take into account other thoughts or opinions. They also do not put a ton of emphasis on explaining the why. For certain directives…it is just basically assumed that I have thought this through.

From Participant G's lens, their leader is "bullish" and notorious for controlling conversations:

> The communications are just choppy, [from their leader's perspective] there is no value
>
> behind what you are bringing to the [conversations]. [The leader and their conversations
>
> are] disingenuous, a lot of times it's just to check a box and while checking that box [they
>
> are] trying to be the biggest voice in the room – literally being the biggest voice in the
>
> room – not figuratively, but being loud, being the one who is opening their mouth, talking
>
> over people and controlling conversation that don't need to be controlled by one party.

The researcher and Participant P discussed their leader's disinterest in receiving feedback as a means to avoid having to do their job. Instead, they simply wanted to reap the benefits of their subordinates' labor without offering any support. This form of self-preservation freed up their time to focus more on their personal interests.

Moral Limbo. Participants were asked how one's moral development impacts one's behavior, and the majority of participants believed that one's moral development has a tremendous impact on one's behavior. Many of the responses alluded to the nature versus nurture debate. From the nature perspective, Participant E's response considered an individual's perception of moral behavior:

> Depending on what you identify as right and wrong or good or bad, and obviously these
>
> are subjective measures and terms, but they dictate how you behave. If I deem something
>
> bad, I am less likely to engage in those behaviors that get me that outcome and vice
>
> versa. If something is good and I have experience with it being 'good,' I am more likely
>
> to engage in behaviors that have that outcome for me.

Participant B agreed that it is a matter of, "What's innate versus what's learned," but focused primarily on the nurture aspect of the debate in terms of how an otherwise moral person can be corrupted by an immoral environment:

> As you are maturing, depending on what you are exposed to, what you are learning, what you are engaged in or who you are engaged with will certainly impact how you act 5, 10, or 20 years down the road in your professional career and in a professional environment or simply in your social interactions.

Participant M added that leaders who engage in selfish or self-serving behaviors, "Observed the behavior [that is not viewed as moral] in others and saw the positive impact…That it has resulted in a good, net benefit to that individual and therefore they just inherently pick that up." Rather than an observed behavior, Participant C discussed the implications of being on the receiving end of immoral behavior in terms of, "If you were wronged by someone, maybe that could lead your morals to change." To that end, an otherwise moral person who was negatively affected by leader self-serving behavior may act outside of their moral beliefs to retaliate against their self-serving leader to seek revenge. Furthermore, like the aforementioned observed behaviors, this experience could warp the individual's worldview, leading them to believe that the only way to get ahead is by engaging in self-serving behavior. Based on their response, Participant A would likely contend that the ladder would be validated and perpetuated by an individual unknowingly "manipulating oneself to justify their selfish behavior."

Overall, the participants' responses indicated that leaders with underdeveloped moral identities will likely behave immorally, not only to achieve their goals but also as a means of self–preservation. At times, competition can be fierce, and resources limited, which the participants claimed evoke feelings of desperation in individuals who prioritize their goals over

the wellbeing of others. In turn, the data suggests that it depends on both the individual and the stakes at hand, which are often predicated by external pressures or the organizations for which they work.

Institutional Inefficiencies

Institutional efficiencies refer to the components of an organization that produce immoral behaviors that are contained within the aforementioned "bad barrel." When asked if an individual can achieve career advancement without engaging in self-serving behavior, Participant M responded:

> I think by and large, yes. I think if you are in an organization that appreciates hard work
> and results and it is less politically inclined, not in a DC politics way, but just internal
> office politics. I work with companies that have an organizational culture that's been
> baked in that does not necessarily reward that kind of [self-serving] behavior, [it instead]
> rewards those who are willing to play politics, willing to suck up to the right individuals,
> and you know that kind of individual is going to find more success in that business
> model.

Answering the same question, Participant S added:

> My current company is probably not the best example of it, because I feel like we do
> have a lot of self-serving. My experience at other clinics, where they had pretty selfless
> leadership by almost maintaining a boots on the ground, or kind of being in the trenches
> with your employees, you'd make them be a little bit more grounded in their decision
> making…being a little bit more grounded helps them understand the cascade, or the
> domino effect of those decisions where they might not necessarily believe it's [a] self-
> serving decision. If they do not have any reference or understanding of that decision, [it]

might be easier for them to [self-serve] versus if they had a type of 'in the trenches type

of attitude' or work ethic…then it kind of gives them [a] better understanding, and [they

are] less likely to be self-serving in their decision making.

A number of participants shared the belief that when an organization lacks a culture of ethics, it

tends to not care about how work gets done so long as it gets done and positively impacts the

organization's bottom line. Affirming the latter statement, Participant A asserted, "Yes, because

the behavior could go unnoticed or fall through the cracks as long as teams are hitting their

targets and the organization is profitable." Participant Q believed the size, complexity, and scope

of global organizations have an impact on leader self-serving behavior:

They also create a competitive work environment, where people are more likely to take

selfish [shortcuts], getting over [on] somebody [to] getting into a position. It is like you

are [in] an environment where everybody you know feeds off each other. I think [in]

bigger corporations' people cannot keep track of everything but the performance

itself…they do not really see what is going on.

Participant K, when asked what external factors may tempt leaders to engage in self-serving

behavior in the workplace, said:

I think the culture of COVID really impacted a lot of companies. Previous to COVID we

were kind of moving toward [focusing on] people and now we are falling back into self-

serving behaviors again…then I think that I think that's all financial because of the

economy.

Like kindred spirits, Participant G shared a similar perspective when responding to the question:

> I would say the health of the business, if you can consider that an external factor. I
>
> noticed a lot of these changes [employee layoffs] occurred when the health of the
>
> business was not so good – to boost numbers and things like that.

When asked the same question, Participant P contended "It starts with the barrel having systematic problems that breed [immoral behaviors]." Aligning with an earlier assertion, the latter suggests that bad barrels accommodate organizational cultures that lack moral values and prioritize profits over people. Participant C's experience was no different because their organization, too, focused primarily on outputs and fiscal performance:

> It was the culture of the organization itself…Making sure your employees were mentally
>
> well never a priority. It does not excuse this person's behavior, but there was zero training
>
> on how to actually be a leader, a leader who cares, [leads with] empathy.

All too often, people join organizations that are disinterested in adapting to an ever-changing market. Participant K shared their experience working for an organization that is resistant to change, "It's the way the company was built, and it's been [that way] for 50+ years, and nobody's really come in and changed that culture or challenged it in a way where it's given time to be successful." From Participant K's perspective, organizations might become comfortable with a sort of "stagnant toxicity" because why expend time and resources, especially when there is a lack of emphasis on the promotion of employee engagement and well-being?

Misguided Incentive Plans. The theory behind corporate rewards systems is to awaken the competitive nature of an organization. However, as Participant K put it, "I think when [organizations] create an environment that's built on sales, numbers, and competition, you kind of separate the team." To that end, the division caused by misguided incentive plans is a probable

cause of the lack of human connection that had been discussed previously. That said, improper development and implementation of incentive plans can lead to unintended consequences, like immoral behavior. Participant B shared their beliefs regarding the fundamental issue of corporate rewards systems:

> The way that incentive plans are constructed, regardless of function and regardless of components within that incentive plan, are driving focus on selfish targets. We focus on what we are incentivized to focus on, as a human being…some of that is unintentional selfishness.

Per the data, an individual's decision to engage in immoral behavior to attain their goals is specific to them and how badly they want to rise above the rest. On the other hand, Participant B continued by stating that immoral individuals further corrupt broken systems, while broken systems, like incentive plans, validate immoral behaviors:

> Some people are inherently competitive, and I think in most cases…unfortunately the corporate environment is a doggy-eat-dog type of place. I think there are a lot of disingenuous people [in corporate environments] and I think that drives that type of behavior, where if you're not being promoted as fast, if you're not being paid as much, if not getting equal recognition, it's seen as an immediate negative and that drives people to act out in ways they wouldn't typically.

Participant G added that when immoral behaviors go unchecked, they become part of the [im]moral fabric that guide organizations:

> But the leaders of these companies, somehow, some ways are always coming out a little bit richer every single year, they are coming out with a little bit more money. Great example: It was a down year. A huge chunk of the workforce got laid off at the end of the

year, [but] when you look at [the] financials, the budget…somehow is on track. People

are still getting these massive bonuses… [There is] no other rhyme or reason but for

[senior leadership] to make more money for [the] company, to be a little bit more

prestigious in the industry, [and] for you to be a bigger name. They really only care about

the bottom dollar…the impact of that is always negative towards others. We have seen it

all year, nothing but layoffs [and a] bad economy.

Participant S's leader expected his subordinates to "infringe upon [their] morals to further his

financial gain." From Participant S's perspective, this expectation stems from:

[The leader's] KPIs (key performance indicator), or how their bonus structures are

oriented because in this situation, I'm the clinical associate, I'm the one that's generating

the revenue, he's more the managerial [side], so he isn't the one generating the revenue,

but his salary and bonuses are determined [by the performance of the] associates that are

responsible for that [generating revenue].

Unrealistic Expectations. The previous theme, Misguided Incentive Plans, seems to

influence the act of setting unrealistic expectations to hit financial targets, which from the

leader's perspective would support their quest for continuous career advancement. Considering

their perspective that "incentive plans drive focus on selfish targets," Participant B shared:

Seeing those same targets, feelings of desperation, chaos, or pressure may motivate

someone to act outside of the basics of doing the right thing. I think in some cases you're

incentivized to hit specific financial targets, whatever it may be, and to ensure that you

are maximizing your earnings potential, essentially that's what may motivate you to act

outside your typical behavior, or it could be not for personal financial gain; rather, it's just

simply that organizationally there's [an] expectation from your leadership that we need to

do 'XY, or Z,' which makes people feel as if they have to perform by any means

necessary.

Participant B continued to stress the importance of establishing a system of checks and balances

to mitigate the behavior, whether that is successful is up to the organization and their

commitment to a culture of ethics:

> I do think there is a responsibility of an organization to ensure reasonable and attainable
>
> expectations, again, whether that be generic behavior expectations or tangible incentive
>
> plan type expectations…reasonable and attainable expectations must be set, otherwise
>
> you are opening the door up to motivating behavior that comes from a place of self-
>
> preservation a self-serving mindset.

Exemplifying the latter, Participant G added:

> What a majority of [self-serving] leaders do is they start to lean on their people…They
>
> have outrageous expectations at times; the way they carry themselves is, in a way, 'Beat
>
> you with a hammer, rather than groom you into the next level,' and ask, 'What can you
>
> produce for me, today?'

Participant I shared a similar experience, which encapsulates the main theme, Institutional

Inefficiencies:

> In busy times, the workload gets really heavy, and I cannot complete my tasks within
>
> eight hours…even though it is not spoken, [it is expected] that I stay after work to
>
> complete all these tasks. I can tell that he works after hours and it's also expected of me to
>
> work those extra hours, as well. By completing all those tasks, he does not have any
>
> complaints, and he does not have any more work to get to the next day. Therefore, he
>
> looks good in front of the client and hears that he is managing his team well, which puts

him in better standing for promotional opportunities as they are someone who has proven

that they will do whatever it takes to succeed.

When the researcher asked Participant I how that personally affects them, they said:

It overwhelms me. It makes me feel like the work is never ending and I also feel rushed

throughout the day, feeling like all tasks must be completed. It is unrealistic because I am

not a robot, I am a human being, but right now I feel like a robot…there is no human

connection, it is very task-oriented.

Lack of Accountability. Whether explicitly stated, a common belief held among most, if

not all of the participants are a lack of accountability in organizations where leader self-serving

behavior is present. Validating the latter assertion, Participant G said, "I feel leadership turns a

blind eye and picks and chooses when they want to hear things [and don't consider] the

downstream impact." Speaking of self-serving leaders, Participant G continued:

They breathe down your neck when something does not go right and they are not

necessarily in the weeds, fighting the same fight as you. They point the finger at you and

say, 'Why did you do this?' …but they were never involved in the situation.

When asked whether the size, complexity, and scope of global organizations have an impact on

leader self-serving behavior, Participant N stated:

I think people can hide in [large, matrixed] organizations because of the sheer amount of

people…People at the top only know what they know and that's just how it is at executive

level because they just can't get into the weeds, they're only going know what the person

below them is telling them and as long as things are progressing, people [leaders] are

probably not looking into that kind of thing [self-serving behaviors].

When asked the same question, Participant K responded:

> From my experience, larger companies or global companies are now public companies,
> which means they are beholden to KPIs or key performance indicators or metrics because
> they have a financial obligation. Smaller companies that are startups, they are all hands
> on, everybody is involved, we make mistakes together…there's team accountability. Big,
> global organizations are now finger pointing, [saying] 'Well, it's your fault. This did not
> happen.' [It is] not a collective [effort] and that makes individuals have self-serving
> behaviors.

To that end, Participant J added, "The responsibility for the poor performance would always be put on us and never on his end." Furthermore, the responses of a number of participants would also suggest that organizations, too, do not hold self-serving leaders accountable for their actions, so long as performance remains steady. Per the latter, Participant Q stated:

> The organization does absolutely nothing [their leader's behavior] and does not hold [the
> leader] accountable for their actions, and [the negative impact of their behavior] is
> diminished [by senior leadership]. If they [the leader] do something wrong, it is a slap on
> the wrist, like, 'Oh, just get along with these people.' But they are saying really
> inappropriate things… the way [they] interact with other departments…is really affecting
> other people.

The data suggests that when organizations fail to hold leaders accountable for their actions, the behaviors are validated and reinforced, thus the behaviors continue. With that in mind, Participant E claimed:

> I would say that is actually mostly the issue because if an individual engaged in selfish
> behaviors, but the organization did not reinforce [the behavior], did not allow it to

continue, then that would not happen or that individual just would not be in that position.

I would say it is due to the organizational system and the environment that has been built

around that selfish leader; to allow them to stay in place, and most of that is because

financially it is beneficial for higher ups and the organization.

Participant E continued by stating:

I think as companies grow, there are less contingencies in place that reinforce and honor

appropriate ways to grow in the company. I think reinforcement for appropriate behaviors

and how you would want someone to [advance in] an organization tends to be overlooked

because it takes a lot more time and effort to put those systems in place.

When considering the external pressures that tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior, it

is clear that the institutional inefficiencies of organizations have a direct impact. The data

suggests that companies leverage misguided incentive plans with the hopes of sparking friendly

competition among the workforce, which instead contributes to a belief that they must perform at

all costs. This belief is validated by the unrealistic expectations set by executive leadership to

meet unattainable goals, when coupled with a lack of accountability, fosters self-serving

behaviors among those who are willing to succeed by any means necessary.

Summary of Research Findings

Overall, this chapter presented the findings extracted from the data collection process to

establish a connection between the data analysis and research inquiries, which is consistent with

the phenomenological methodology that guided this research study. Nineteen participants, who

identified as having prior or current professional experience during which they have or currently

report to an individual who, in their opinion, shows signs of and/or engages in leader self-serving

behavior, were interviewed. Each participant provided insights to support the collection and

analysis of data to answer the research study's central question: What causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement in global organizations? Additionally, their responses provided data for the corresponding sub-questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of individuals who have directly reported to and/or worked with self-serving leaders?; (2) What internal factors (i.e., egoism, the dark tetrad, and/or moral development) may tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace?; (3) What external factors (i.e., organizational culture and/or corporate rewards systems) may tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace? While no particular theme could serve as an all-encompassing answer to the central question of this study, each theme offers a unique perspective into the many causes of leader self-serving behavior.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

This study explored the theories of egoism and moral development, considering the influences of organizational culture and corporate rewards systems, to expand upon what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement. A review of the literature offered a basis from which the interview protocol could be developed to support the process of research inquiry. Nineteen participants from relatively diverse backgrounds shared their stories and perspectives related to the phenomenon. To their credit, each participant put their pride aside and allowed themselves to be vulnerable. This vulnerability only enhanced the conversations and provided the participants a platform to share their lived experiences, which are from the perspective of someone who has been directly impacted by leader self-serving behavior. While the participants came to this study from relatively diverse

backgrounds, commonalities in their responses were found. These shared perspectives and

experiences speak to the practices or policies that could be developed to mitigate the prevalence

of leader self-serving behavior in our everyday lives.

Discussion

As to be expected, many of the participants shared negative experiences that come with

working for self-serving leaders. Although their lived experiences varied, there was a constant,

almost palpable tone shared by each participant, on an individual level, as they were given a

platform to air their thoughts and grievances. When asked questions that spoke to their beliefs,

most participants were relatively upbeat and engaging but when it came to sharing their stories,

their tones became a bit more somber. It was apparent that the memories of their encounters with

self-serving leaders, like any traumatic life event, are something that they will carry with them

for years to come.

At the foundation of this research study was the bad apples versus bad barrel debate, to

which the themes coincided, however two conformed to the bad apples' stance and two to the

bad barrel position. The two main themes that supported the bad apples side of the argument are:

(1) character flaws, including lack of human connection, calculated chaos, and keeping up with

the joneses; and (2) naturally selfish, including responsibility evasion. The two main themes that

align with the bad barrel side of the argument are: (1) situational dependence, including self-

preservation and moral limbo; and (2) institutional inefficiencies, including misguided incentive

plans, unrealistic expectations, and lack of accountability. Overall, the four main themes and

corresponding sub-themes that emerged from the data could all serve as potential drivers of

leader self-serving behavior, whether on an individual basis or collectively. These findings can

be used to help individuals with similar experiences to overcome the trials and tribulations that come with directly reporting to a self-serving leader.

To consider the phenomenon of leader self-serving behavior from the bad apples' position required investigation into the identities of individuals who engage in self-serving behavior. Thus, the formulation of the second research question, which aimed to explore the potential internal factors (i.e., egoism, the dark tetrad, and moral development) that tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace. While the results of this study are by no means exhaustive, they reinforce the current literature to suggest that self-serving leaders tend to exhibit personality traits (i.e., character flaws) that border patterns of behavior related to subclinical personality disorders (Braun, 2017). The question is whether the self-serving leader's character flaws are innate; or instead, a learned behavior they have developed through their lived experiences.

A majority of the participants claimed that human beings are naturally selfish. This belief aligns with the theories of egoism, ethical egoism specifically, which affirms the legitimacy of selfishness, assuming the actor exercises discretion (Rachels, 2012). Because selfishness is a derivative of self-interest it would likely be more appropriate to consider it in terms of a spectrum instead of absolutes. The difference between self-interest and selfishness or self-serving behavior is contextual and a matter of intent (Carlson et al., 2022). As has been discussed, self-interest is not inherently negative nor self-serving. In fact, there are instances in which it is in one's best interest to behave altruistically (Peake et al., 2015). The delineation between the two terms stems from the actor. Depending on the individual and their moral code (i.e., the principles one observes that guides their behaviors and actions), self-serving behavior can be thought of as a corrupted or "weaponized" self-interest that is promoted at all costs. In

these circumstances, the actor's sole focus is to promote their personal interests, which likely

results in a complete lack of consideration for how their actions might negatively impact another.

Furthermore, the results align with the current literature to suggest that a portion of those who

climb the corporate ladder do so to feed their egos and are willing to go to great lengths to

achieve their goals (LeBreton et al., 2018).

Based on the collective responses of each participant, it seemed that, from their

experiences, their leaders had a rather hands-off approach and did not much care who was

negatively impacted by their lack of support. As per the literature, their leader's priority was to

remove themselves from the day-to-day to free up their time to focus on what's most important

to them: their personal interests (Kessler et al., 2010; Jonason & Webster, 2012). According to

the participants in the study, these interests were: financial gain, which allows the individual to

take care of their personal wants, needs, and desires; improvements in self-esteem and self-worth

that feeds their inner narcissist; and an increased work-life balance, which prioritizes their needs

over all else. Furthermore, they were not concerned with how the work was done as long as it

was done, and the organization was profitable, especially when they could misattribute said

performance and profitability to their leadership. Individuals afflicted by the dark tetrad,

especially those who are plagued by vanity or greed might do whatever it takes to keep up with

the Joneses, the latter being both an internal but also external pressure that tempts leaders to

engage in self-serving behavior (Prusik & Szulawski, 2019). In extreme cases, the self-serving

leader might employ a calculated, sort of "scorched earth" policy to preempt any opposition and

stop at nothing to achieve what they desire.

This study validated the belief that individuals with underdeveloped moral identities are

programmed by the observed benefits of leader self-serving behavior (Gibbs, 2019). The latter

comes as no surprise to the researcher because it is human nature to take the path of least

resistance (Nordgren & Schonthal, 2021). Thus, self-serving leaders will exploit their

subordinates, colleagues, and organizations for their personal gain because doing so requires far

less time and resources expenditures than doing it the "right" way. Offering the benefit of the

doubt, even an otherwise moral individual could find themselves engaging in self-serving

behavior due to ethical fading (Rees et al., 2019). They might be laser focused on achieving their

dreams to the point that they lose sight of the implications of their actions and because of the

self-deception that has taken place. Consequently, their subconscious leads them to believe that

their behavior is moral but in reality, they are instead enticed by the perceived benefits of self-

serving behavior. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that a leader's narrow focus on

themselves creates an emotional detachment from their subordinates and/or colleagues (Gómez-

Leal et al., 2023). In turn, this emotional detachment festers and transforms into a lack of human

connection that supports the self-serving leader's defiance of Kant's second formulation of the

Categorical Imperative (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Aligning with the literature, the

researcher posits that if a leader lacks personal connections with their employees and/or

colleagues, they are more likely to exploit them as means to their self-serving ends. Conversely,

if a leader has personal connections and vested interests in the well-being of their employees or

colleagues, they are more likely to develop dyadic relationships with those individuals centered

on benevolence and goodwill.

One participant shared an interesting perspective that it must be pretty lonely at the top

for self-serving leaders. According to Gabriel et al. (2021), seemingly well-adjusted, prosocial

leaders find themselves feeling isolated due to the natural power dynamics of people leadership,

but it is curious if self-serving leaders share the same experiences. To that end, the results of this

study suggest that because of their aspirations and ambitions, self-serving leaders, whether purposely or otherwise, alienate themselves to the point at which it is difficult for them to develop or hold any sort of meaningful relationship with their workplace acquaintances.

Overall, the study's nineteen participants believed that it is possible to advance one's career without engaging in self-serving behavior, but doing so requires a personal commitment to living a moral life. While social media influencers would likely suggest otherwise, people tend to not be self-made. No matter how competent an individual might be, they need some sort of help to accomplish their goals, whether that is in the form of motivation, guidance, or support (e.g., moral, mental, emotional, spiritual, or financial). Nevertheless, it is unlikely that people can succeed solely on their own. To the ethical egoist, upward mobility and career development necessitates prosocial behavior as it promotes moral reciprocity (Shaver, 2002; Smith & Malinowski, 2018). Conversely, if an individual is solely focused on themselves, most rational people would be unwilling to offer support, thus inhibiting the self-serving leader's ability to climb the corporate ladder. In the spirit of the theme *calculated chaos*, it would behoove the self-serving leader to at least fake prosocial behavior to reap the benefits of reciprocity. One participant in particular discussed the short-term benefits and long-term repercussions of self-serving behavior, from the perspective of the leader. They likened organizations and industries, depending on size, to small communities that will eventually root out those who develop a reputation for being exploitative or someone who engages in self-serving behavior. Whether that is for moral reasons or otherwise, the researcher would suppose is up to interpretation. Looking at it from the perspective that humans are naturally selfish, one might suggest that this "eradication" of the exposed self-serving leader may be nothing other than a ruse to thin out the

competition for other self-serving leaders. Regardless, this participant claimed that leader self-serving behavior is not a sustainable means to drive long-term career growth.

To investigate leader self-serving behavior from the bad barrel viewpoint, the researcher developed the third research question, which examines the external factors (i.e., organizational culture and/or corporate rewards systems) that tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace. From this perspective, the researcher suggests that a leader's decision to engage in self-serving behavior depends not only on their personality traits, an innate selfishness, or lack of emotional connection to their peers or subordinates, but also on the situation at hand. Aligning with the current literature, this study found that self-serving leaders leverage their influence within an organization to defend against competition and drive initiatives that support their individual interests (Northouse, 2021). Because self-serving leaders tend to be calculated, they are quite strategic in their efforts to preempt the uncertainties of operating in hypercompetitive environments. To that end, this study adds to the discussion of Wisse et al. (2019) regarding "the mechanisms underlying the moderating effect of perceived competitive climate in the fear of power loss – self-serving behavior relationships" (p. 751). Accordingly, the collection of participant responses endorses both explanations, considering their shared experiences of working in organizations that prioritize profits over people that ultimately pit employees against one another in the name of "healthy competition." The latter statement supports previous research on the implications of balancing profitability and humanity (Melé, 2019).

The majority of participants agreed that in global, matrixed environments, leader self-serving behavior can be ignored because a bad barrel's prioritization of profits over people perpetuates the lack of human connection that had been discussed previously. In these

environments, there is more of an emphasis placed on results and the steps taken to achieve them are often overlooked because they drive performance, often by any means necessary (Sauer et al.. 2018; Welsh et al., 2019). Therefore, the findings of this study validate the claims of Gürlek (2021) to confirm that regardless of intention, incentive plans seem to be designed to drive self-serving behavior. The ladder is especially prevalent when limited resources are allocated to governing the behaviors that are associated with gaining financial incentives. Based on participant responses, self-serving leaders leverage the shortcomings of organizations that lack a culture of ethics and prioritize profits over people. Therefore, self-serving leaders are not held accountable for their actions because their performance positively impacts the organization's bottom line. In a matter of speaking, the unrealistic expectations set forth by misguided incentive plans bring out the worst in us.

This research suggests that the situational dependency of the phenomenon tends to be organizationally-driven, but it is up to the individual to decide how they respond. Considering the situation at hand, an individual's morality dictates their behavior (Camps et al., 2012). From a Kantian perspective, however, the Categorical Imperative contends that one must deny the temptations to exploit another as a means to an end for their personal gain (Beauchamp and Childress, 2019). For the self-serving leader, whose moral identity has already been corrupted, the stakes only intensify their immoral behavior. They are likely quick to reject Kantian wisdom for their needs supersede all else. For the otherwise moral individual, the observed net benefits of self-serving behavior appeal to their natural selfishness that promotes immoral behavior to attain comparable results. The possibilities of these observations initiate an exercise of dual-process decision making, that is influenced by one's moral identity, to determine the best course of action (Lefebvre & Krettenauer, 2019; Padilla et al., 2018).

Multiple participants cited noticeable changes in their leader's demeanor and behavior as they advanced in the organization. Their leader's attention shifted from mentorship and driving employee engagement to focus solely on the promotion of their personal interests. From the participants' perspective, this shift in focus can be attributed to a lack of resources and scarcity of growth opportunities that lead to increased competition. These environments are especially prevalent in organizations that lack a culture of ethics which reinforces leader self-serving behavior due to a shortage of accountability measures (Ghanem & Castelli, 2019). Capitalizing on this lack of accountability from the top down, self-serving leaders do not hold themselves to the same standards that are imposed upon their subordinates. Furthermore, they undermine the capabilities of those around them to emphasize their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Not only that, but self-serving leaders also tend to cast blame when things do not go to plan as a means of self-preservation (Kraft et al., 2024). In addition to the latter, leaders engage in self-serving behavior, like hoarding resources, to promote job security. In their minds, the results of this behavior will render them irreplaceable because they have access to information that is unavailable to everyone else. To those ends, the results align with the literature to suggest that the situational dependence of leader self-serving behavior also stems from not wanting to challenge the status quo, especially when one operates in a toxic work environment (Neveu & Kakavand, 2019). This form of self-preservation aligns to the responsibility evasion discussed previously as the leader avoids engaging in moral behavior because doing so would likely be detrimental to their upward mobility within an organization that is supremely focused on driving performance. Nevertheless, a majority of the participants believed that leader self-serving behavior can be prevented with accountability measures, training, implementing

policies/procedures, organizational commitment to a culture of ethics, hiring moral people, and setting attainable goals.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Practice

The findings of this study have contributed to the current literature in terms of expanding upon what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement in global organizations. While unfortunate, because no one should endure the emotional turmoil that comes with reporting to a self-serving leader, this study offers solace to those who have been negatively impacted by the phenomenon, proving they are not alone in their experiences. On a positive note, the findings of this study have identified several intervention strategies to mitigate leader self-serving behavior in the workplace (See below). The researcher would also like to acknowledge the fact that the following recommendations would require a significant capital investment in time, resources, and money to be possible, but these things are necessary.

Leadership Training. In a perfect world, there is leadership training that has been designed to completely eliminate leader self-serving behavior in organizations that integrate it into their learning and development curriculum. Because we do not live in such a utopia, at a minimum, organizations could implement workshops aimed at promoting awareness around leader self-serving behavior. An organization's learning and development or local HR team could host lunch and learns to get people talking about the phenomenon. Topics could include an overview of leader self-serving behavior in terms of who it affects, how to spot it, and who to contact when one feels they have witnessed it, as well as moral development, ethical fading, and the like. Thus, establishing accountability measures aimed at preempting leader self-serving

behavior (Northouse, 2021). While no training is perfect, the goal of these workshops would be to gain an organization-wide commitment to preventing immoral behaviors in the workplace.

      Redesigned Incentive Plans. In some cases, it is possible that incentive plans and corporate rewards systems can positively impact an organization in terms of improved employee engagement which results in increased productivity and performance (Coccia & Igor, 2018). However, previous studies have also shown that incentive plans and corporate rewards systems can (unintentionally) promote an unhealthy competition that encourages immoral behavior (Gürlek, 2021; Piezunka et al., 2018; Treviño et al., 2014). Aligning with the latter, the findings of this study validated how incentive plans tend to be structured and implemented and that they evoke an innate selfishness that entices or compels people to perform at all costs. These behaviors are driven by unrealistic expectations set forth by leaders who have been corrupted by toxic organizational cultures that prioritize profits over employee well-being (Niven & Healy, 2016).

      While the researcher acknowledges the importance of profitability, from an organizational perspective to keep businesses afloat, there has to be a better way to incentivize people to excel in their work. Hence, this study reinforces the need for fundamental changes to total rewards (i.e., compensation and benefits) philosophies and strategies. For one, organizations must take interest in the behaviors behind the actions that produce the results that enable leaders to hit their targets. In some cases, it would take a complete overhaul because the effects of leader self-serving behavior are felt from the top down. In others, executive leadership may not be aware of the immoral behaviors that transpire at the departmental level because they lack visibility into those parts of the business. Instead, they are focused on the big picture and tend to only receive business updates in the form of executive summary spreadsheets or monthly

business reviews. Presumably, if teams are performing and the organization is profitable, what cause would they have to investigate leader self-serving further down the ranks? However, ignorance is not an excuse. Corporate rewards systems and incentive plans should be designed to inhibit the unhealthy competition that leads people to believe they must perform at all costs or by any means necessary. These changes would require buy-in from the organization as a whole, that could be supported by the development of accountability measures to reinforce moral behaviors to meet organizational objectives and individual goals. For people leaders, in particular, perhaps there could be a condition added to their incentive plans or performance reviews that involve a 360 feedback component. The latter will be discussed in the following section. Not only would these adjustments need to be introduced in the corporate world but also in the system of higher education. Outside of just improving corporate rewards systems, why not educate soon-to-be graduates on the effects of self-serving behavior with the goal of discouraging it entirely?

      360 Feedback Performance Reviews. As the name suggests, 360 feedback appraises an individual's capabilities based on the perceptions of those around them "for the purpose of creating sustainable individual, group and/or organizational change in behaviors valued by the organization" (Bracken et al., 2016, p. 764). When reviewing a leader's performance, the researcher would recommend that organizations incorporate feedback from the bottom up to hold leaders accountable for their actions. In turn, subordinates would be given a platform to address any concerns regarding their leader's self-serving behavior, if applicable, which could act as a supplement to employee relations or grievance policies. Granted, HR leaders will have to exercise judgment to discern what is legitimate or simply an unfounded complaint. Ideally, the integration of a 360 feedback component into a leader's performance reviews would help to dissuade them from engaging in self-serving behavior, while reinforcing the importance of moral

behavior. That said, these process changes might only be suitable for organizations that foster open communication and a culture of ethics.

Intentional Hiring Practices. Organizations could try to implement leadership training, redesign incentive plans, or integrate 360-degree feedback systems into their performance reviews, but one way to mitigate leader self-serving behavior is to simply prevent it from happening. Although the latter is far easier said than done, it is possible if the "right" people lead the initiative and hold all parties accountable to ensuring the interview process detects and deters individuals who exhibit self-serving tendencies. Human resources (HR) and talent acquisition (TA) leaders tasked with developing and implementing these processes must be intentional and thorough in their approach. As a first line of defense, HR and TA teams could incorporate a personality or integrity test to weed out applicants with an underdeveloped moral identity. Upon completion of the assessment portion of the process, successful candidates would be invited to proceed to the interview stage of the hiring process. Considering each candidate's time, there should be a minimum of two diverse panel interviews conducted to appraise candidates' knowledge, skills, and abilities from various perspectives, while mitigating impression management or other manipulative behaviors expressed by self-serving candidates who might have "outsmarted" the personality or integrity assessment. To supplement the interview portion of the hiring process, interview guides should be created or redesigned to incorporate specific questions to help identify would-be self-serving leaders. That said, the questions should be objective to prevent subjective interpretations of candidate responses by panel members who may simply not like the individual. After each interview, debrief calls should be scheduled so that panel members can compare notes, share any concerns about the candidate's moral code, and to discuss next steps.

Limitations

As with any research, this phenomenological study was not without limitations. Research involving human subjects can be limited by the data collected from the study's participants (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). While the researcher made every attempt to restrict impositions of bias (i.e., bracketing), it is impossible to completely remove one's emotions from the equation, especially in an intimate setting, like an interview. After all, the researcher's past experiences and academic interests are at the core of this study. See Chapter 3 for the researcher's statement concerning bias.

Because the researcher called upon their professional networks to develop a sample population, the study's results may not represent the lived experiences of working professionals in different regions of the United States or from diverse cultures around the world. Thus, creating a lack of generalizability. The collection of self-reported data is often a contributing factor to the limitations of a study (Lavrakas, 2008). Consequently, study participants may offer responses that portray themselves in a morally superior light, thus engaging in social desirability bias (Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study serve as a foundational reference point for other studies of its kind. Based on the study's research design, it brought to light the lived experiences of individuals who have been directly impacted by leader self-serving behavior. However, the limitations of this study have identified several opportunities for future exploration. For example, the researcher called upon their professional networks to recruit participants and although the sample was relatively diverse, the data may not be wholly representative of the total population. Hence, future studies should broaden the participant pool to individuals outside the primary

investigator's professional network to include all regions of the United States to improve generalizability. Supplemental questions could be asked to uncover different perspectives pertaining to the potential causes of leader self-serving behavior. Because a number of participants considered selfishness in terms of nature versus nurture, perhaps one might ask, for example, "In what sort of environment was the self-serving leader raised?" Questions of this variety might lead to deeper insight into the phenomenon.

To accommodate a larger participant pool, perhaps the research design could be altered, as well, to include a quantitative survey, rather than relying on interviews to collect data. While the interviews proved to be an effective tool to provide individuals with an opportunity to share their lived experiences with leader self-serving behavior, incorporating a quantitative survey would likely be a more efficient way to collect the data as more participants could be reached in a shorter amount of time and with less effort. Furthermore, a quantitative survey would add another layer of anonymity because the researcher would not have to come into personal contact with participants, thus affording participants a greater psychological safety and comfort to provide candid responses without fear of judgment, reducing social desirability bias. Additionally, the added layer of anonymity that a survey instrument allows might enable a change in the participant population. Therefore, future studies could target leaders who have engaged in self-serving behavior to gain their perspectives regarding the causes and/or justifications of the behavior. Nevertheless, it would still be difficult to assemble a pool of participants who would feel comfortable self-identifying as a self-serving leader.

Conclusion

The findings of this study helped to expand upon the current literature as it relates to what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement. This study was underpinned by the bad apples versus bad barrel debate, thus supporting the data analysis process, which produced four major themes with corresponding sub-themes that serve as potential causes of leader self-serving behavior. Those themes are: (1) character flaws, which includes lack of human connection, calculated chaos, and keeping up with the Joneses; (2) responsibility evasion, which includes naturally selfish; (3) situational dependence, which includes self-preservation and moral limbo; and (4) institutional inefficiencies, which includes misguided incentive plans, unrealistic expectations, and lack of accountability. The first three themes reinforced the bad apples stance of the debate, whereas the last theme, institutional inefficiencies, aligned with the bad barrel perspective. The researcher's interpretations of these themes resulted in a number of implications for future practice to both predict and prevent leader self-serving behavior.

In closing, it would appear that we all have something to prove; either to ourselves, friends, colleagues, families, or perhaps even the world. Combining conventional wisdom and the findings of this study, it seems each of us wants to be somebody or to do something with our lives, but some are more driven than others. Per Lewis (1966), we all have "inner rings" to which we desire access. Like self-interest, these rings are not inherently evil, but they have a way of tempting one's impulsivity. To some, the temptation to gain entrance into these rings is so powerful that it leads them to engage in self-serving behavior. McDowell (1994) suggests that "problematic excuses" stem from a fundamentally flawed system and not innate wickedness. Corporate rewards systems are flawed because those who created them, too, are flawed because

as per the Acton-Creighton correspondence, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." As a result, leaders are confronted with moral dilemmas with respect to the maximization of personal gain and the means taken to promote such ends. As imperfect beings, we do not always do what is right or socially accepted. Consequently, Damon Horowitz would likely recommend a much-needed update to our collective "moral operating system" (Ted-Ed, 2011). In turn, we should all hold ourselves accountable to act in good faith, aligning with an unseen code of ethics by which we all should abide. It will not happen overnight, but if we strive to promote a "common morality" the world in which we live may very well just improve.

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Appendix A

Email Recruitment Message Template

Subject Line: Invitation to Participate in the Research Study: Leader Self-Serving Behavior: Bad Apples Competing in Bad Barrels

Dear Participant:

My name is Nick Reed, and I am a doctoral student at Marywood University. I am conducting a research study. Its purpose is to expand upon what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement.

You are invited to participate if you qualify. To see if you qualify, please read the requirements below:

- You are 18 years or older or of legal adult age in your jurisdiction
- You have attained a high school diploma or equivalent
- You have current or prior experience reporting to an individual you believe has engaged in leader self-serving behavior

The research will take place via virtual interview (e.g., Microsoft Teams). Interviews will take about 30-45 minutes to complete.

A benefit may be that collected data may add to the research on the causes of leader self-serving behavior. All records of this study will be kept private. The data will be destroyed after 3 years.

If you fit these requirements and are interested in participating, please email me at:
njreed@m.marywood.edu.

This study has been approved by Marywood University's Exempt Review Committee.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please let me know if you have any comments or questions.

Sincerely,

Nicholas J. Reed
njreed@m.marywood.edu

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

ERC Informed Consent Form

Title: Leader Self-Serving Behavior: Bad Apples Competing in a Bad Barrel

Principal Investigator (PI): Nicholas J. Reed, Student at Marywood University
Principal Investigator Contact Information: njreed@marywood.edu | (717) 779-9160
Research Advisor: Dr. Alan Levine, Marywood University
Research Advisor Contact Information: levine@maryu.marywood.edu | (570) 348-6290

Invitation for a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the possible influences of leader self-serving behavior. You were chosen because you fit the requirements below:

- You are 18 years or older or of legal adult age in your jurisdiction
- You have attained a high school diploma or equivalent
- You have current or prior experience reporting to an individual you believe has engaged in leader self-serving behavior

Please read this form. Ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose – About the Study

The purpose of this study is to expand upon what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement.

Procedures - What You Will Do

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual interview via Microsoft Teams. The virtual interview will be recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams' recording and transcription software. The researcher might review the transcript with you at a later time to ensure your responses reflect your true beliefs. The total time commitment is between 30-45 minutes.

Risks and Benefits

A benefit may be that collected data may add to the current literature and research on the causes of leader self-serving behavior. The risks are no greater than those in everyday life.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. Information used in any written or presented report will not make it possible to identify you. Only the principal investigator will have access to the research records. Digital records will be kept in a secure location on a password protected computer. Records will be kept private for 3 years. Then they will be deleted. No web-based action is perfectly secure. However, reasonable efforts will be made to protect your transmission from third-party access.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the investigator. It will not affect your relationship with Marywood University. You may withdraw at any time until your virtual interview is completed. There will be no penalty. To withdraw, please kindly inform the investigator. Your information will be deleted upon request. However, you will be unable to withdraw after completing the interview because the researcher will be unable to identify which interview transcript is yours.

Contacts and Questions

If you have questions about this study at any time, contact the principal investigator or the advisor. Their contact information appears at the top of this form.

If you have questions related to the rights of research participants or research-related injuries (where applicable), please contact the Institutional Review Board at (570) 961-4782 or irbhelp@marywood.edu.

You may save or print a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent

By proceeding:
- You understand what the study involves.
- You have asked questions if you had them.
- You agree to participate in the study.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

- o Time of interview:
- o Date:
- o Place:
- o Principal Investigator:
- o Participant Pseudonym:

- Bio:
    - Age:
    - Gender:
    - Race:
    - Highest level of education completed:
    - Years of professional experience:
    - Experience level (e.g., entry-level, associate, etc.):
    - Location (geographical region of the US):
    - Industry:
    - Supervisor location (geographical region of the US):
    - Supervisor gender:
    - Supervisor age (estimated):
    - Supervisor years of leadership experience (estimated):

- Interview:
    - **DISCLAIMER: To maintain confidentiality, please do not provide such details that identify places, persons, or entities.**

    - Research question:
        - What causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement in organizations?

    - Interview questions:
        - How would you define morality?
        - How would you describe selfishness and what might cause someone to act selfishly?
        - Are people naturally selfish and if so, why?
        - How does one's moral development impact their future behavior?
            - the gradual formation of an individual's concepts of right and wrong, conscience, ethical and religious values, social attitudes, and behavior.
        - In your opinion, how do people typically attain their goals?
        - What sort of leader is your direct manager?
        - Tell me about a time in which you had been directly impacted by your leader's self-serving behavior. **Again, please do not provide such details that identify places, persons, or entities.**

- ▪ How did that affect you?
- ▪ Are such occurrences matters of happenstance or are they premeditated? Why?
- ▪ What internal factors may tempt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior in the workplace?
- ▪ What external factors may tempt leaders to partake in self-serving behavior in the workplace?
- ▪ Is it immoral for leaders to self-serve? If not, in what sorts of circumstances is such behavior permissible and for what causes?
- ▪ How does the success of one's peers influence one's decision to engage in self-serving behavior to attain a similar or more impressive social status?
- ▪ How do advancements in one's career lead to the betterment of one's personal life?
- ▪ Can we achieve career advancement without engaging in self-serving behavior?
- ▪ Due to the size, complexity, and scope of global organizations, are leaders who operate within them more likely to engage in self-serving behavior?
- • Is it possible to thwart leader self-serving behavior in the workplace? If so, why?
- • Do you have anything additional you would like to add for the good of the study?

Appendix D

Professional Review Form

Marywood University – Institutional Review Board and Exempt Review Committee
Liberal Arts Center, 2300 Adams Avenue, Scranton, PA 18509
Phone: (570) 348-6211, x.2418 or Email: irbhelp@marywood.edu

PROFESSIONAL REVIEW FORM

INSTRUCTIONS: Complete this form when you have created or adapted a questionnaire, interview questions or other instrumentation, or when planning to use standardized instruments which lack established validity or reliability. The reviewing professional must hold a Master's degree or higher in a related discipline, and have no role within your study (e.g. professor who does not serve as advisor or on your thesis/dissertation committee; professional working in field). **Submit the completed and hand-signed form at irbnet.org with your submission package.**

Principal Investigator	Nicholas J. Reed
Co-Investigator(s)	Click here to enter name(s) or N/A.
Title of Study	Leader Self-Serving Behavior: Bad Apples Competing in a Bad Barrel

Reviewing Professional's Name & Degrees	Darrin Kass, Ph.D.
Reviewing Professional's Work Title	Professor of Management, Commonwealth University of PA – Bloomsburg
Reviewing Professional's Telephone	(570) 389-4394
Reviewing Professional's Email	dkass@commonwealthu.edu

List of Documents Reviewed	Self-Created Instrument (Interview Protocol)

I certify that I have reviewed the self-created, adapted or non-validated and reliable research questionnaire, interview questions or other instrumentation that will be utilized in this study. I attest that it/they are appropriate for the nature of the proposed research and fully endorse utilization within this study.

_____   5/8/24
Hand Signature of Professional (No signature fonts)   _____
                                                             Date

Appendix E

Marywood University Exempt Review Committee Approval Decision Letter

MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY
EXEMPT REVIEW COMMITTEE
Liberal Arts Center, 2300 Adams Avenue, Scranton, PA 18509

DATE:	May 16, 2024
TO:	Nicholas Reed
FROM:	Marywood University Exempt Review Committee
STUDY TITLE:	[2194528-2] *Leader Self-Serving Behavior: Bad Apples Competing in a Bad Barrel*
MU ERC #:	2024-E028
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Amendment/Modification
ACTION:	APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE:	May 16, 2024
CHECK IN DUE DATE:	**May 16, 2025**
REVIEW TYPE:	Exempt Review
EXEMPT CATEGORY:	45 CFR 46.104 (d)(2)(i)

Dear Nicholas Reed:

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials to your Exemption Request for this research study. Marywood University's ERC has **APPROVED** your submission. The project meets federal exemption criteria and involves minimal risk to subjects participating in the research. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a complete description of the study and assurance of subject understanding.

We have applied the ERC's approval stamp to the following documents, which have been uploaded with this letter in IRBNet (While viewing Project Overview for your study > Reviews tab on left > Under Board Documents at the bottom > Next to package #2). The stamp must appear on versions shared with subjects wherever possible (e.g., when attaching the informed consent

form to a follow-up email message). If it is not feasible to use the stamped versions online (e.g., the body of an email message), please ensure that the language in the transmitted versions is identical to the stamped versions.

1. Email Recruitment Message
2. Informed Consent Form

Please also note that:

- **CLOSURE REPORTING:** Upon completion of the research, you must file a closure report form via IRBNet. Failure to close your study may result in review delays for any new studies.
- **CHECK IN REPORTING:** While there is no expiration date for exempted studies, the ERC maintains oversight of open projects. If activities will continue beyond your approval's one-year anniversary of **May 16, 2025**, file a check in form by that date.
- **RECORDS RETENTION:** While there is no minimum retention period for exempted studies, you must retain records for the length of time stated in your application and informed consent form.
- **DEVIATION, UNANTICIPATED PROBLEM OR SERIOUS ADVERSE EVENT REPORTING:** If any of these events occur, you must file the appropriate form immediately via IRBNet.
- **REVISION REQUESTS:** If you decide to make procedural or document changes to your approved project, you must file a revision request form for review and approval prior to implementation, except when necessary to eliminate apparent, immediate hazards to the subjects. In hazardous situations, you must file the form immediately afterward.

The appropriate forms for any of the reports mentioned above may be found at irbnet.org. After logging in, click the Forms and Templates button on the left menu, and then select the correct library.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Office at 570-348-6211, x.2418 or irbhelp@marywood.edu. Please include your study title and IRBNet number in all correspondence with this office.

Thank you and good luck with your research!

Regards,
Exempt Review Committee

Appendix F

Creswell and Poth's Simplification of Moustaka's Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data

1. First describe personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. The researcher begins with a full description of his or her own experience of the phenomenon. This is an attempt to set aside the researcher's personal experiences (which cannot be done entirely) so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study.

2. Develop a list of significant statements. The researcher then finds statements (in the interviews or other data sources) about how individuals are experiencing the topic, lists these significant statements (horizonalization of the data) and treats each statement as having equal worth, and works to develop a list of nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statements.

3. Take the significant statements and then group them into larger units of information, called "meaning units" or themes.

4. Write a description of "what" the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon. This is called a "textural description" of the experience—what happened—and includes verbatim examples.

5. Next write a description of "how" the experience happened. This is called "structural description," and the inquirer reflects on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced. For example, in a phenomenological study of the smoking behavior of high school students (McVea, Harter, McEntarffer, & Creswell, 1999), my colleagues and I provide a structural description about where the phenomenon of

smoking occurs, such as in the parking lot, outside the school, by student lockers, in

remote locations at the school, and so forth.

6. Finally, write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural

and structural descriptions. This passage is the "essence" of the experience and represents

the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study. It is typically a long paragraph that

tells the reader "what" the participants experienced with the phenomenon and "how" they

experienced it (i.e., the context).