The Roles of Hierarchy and Relational Closeness in Confrontations about Idea Stealing

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This language production experiment sought to provide insight into workers' directness and facework strategies when confronting another employee about the understudied unethical act (Graham & Cooper, 2013) of idea stealing in the workplace. Participants included 326 full-time working adults, each of whom were randomly assigned to one of nine conditions in which they were asked to form a response to a hypothetical idea thief. Conditions varied based on two workplace relationship factors—the hierarchical relationship between the confronter and confronted and the relational closeness between the confronter and confronted. The implicitness-explicitness of confrontations was impacted by hierarchy, in that peer coworkers-confronting-peer coworkers and supervisors-confronting-subordinates were significantly more explicit in their confrontations than subordinates-confronting-supervisors. There were no significant differences in confrontational explicitness based on whether the transgressor was a troublesome other, acquaintance, or friend. Study data support the notion that in cases of idea stealing, the context of hierarchy trumps the context or relational closeness in shaping workers' confrontationality. Identity frames and the communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004) are used as lenses to understand the detected (and undetected) differences in participants' responses across workplace relationship types.

Keywords: idea stealing, workplace relationships, organizational ethics, social confrontations, facework, communication theory of identity

Introduction

Stealing a tangible resource such as money or equipment may be among the first thoughts that come to mind when considering theft in the workplace; however, the focus of this study is the stealing of a more intangible and often unseen resource—ideas. Ideas are an interesting commodity in workplaces in that they serve to benefit the worker intrinsically (through feelings of pride and worth for generating the ideas) and extrinsically if they are recognized for the ideas (Ploeger-Lyons & Bisel, in press). Recognition for one's ideas and work may impact motivation, performance, and retention in positive ways (Rawat et al., 2015). In addition, workers' ideas, at least in part, fuel their own organizational success and often that of their work group, supervisor, and/or organization at large. To that end, a worker's identity(ies), especially as they are related to interactions with those different organizational actors, may impact and be impacted by the interactions surrounding ownership of their ideas.

While legal cases of intellectual property theft generally concern infringements of trademarks, patents, and copyrights, we frame *idea stealing* as the presentation of another's cognitive (unpatented and uncopyrighted) contributions as one's own (Ploeger-Lyons & Bisel, in press). Idea stealing is an inherently communicative and message-based phenomenon "in the sense that it requires the transgressor to have learned of someone else's ideas through listening or reading, and then present the ideas as their own through speaking or writing" (Ploeger-Lyons & Bisel, in press). Idea stealing is often linked with unjustified credit taking, or the notion that the person who receives credit for the idea or the work done

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did not originate the idea, did not produce the work, and/or is granted more than a fair share of credit (Graham & Cooper, 2013). Social sciences researchers have also likened idea stealing to plagiarism, noting that "it constitutes a deceptive impression management tactic that falsely inflate[s] the plagiarizer's reputation" (Silver & Shaw, 2018, p. 216). It stands to reason that idea stealing is grounds for a social confrontation in the workplace.

The purpose of the current language production experiment is to provide insight into such confrontations through an analysis of working adults' responses to another worker who presented the participant's ideas as their own, thus taking credit for the participant's intellectual contributions. While there are many factors workers may consider when deciding why, when, and how to confront an idea stealer (e.g., organizational culture, perceived importance of the idea, potential gain), we focus this experiment on two relational considerations. Specifically, do workers' directness and facework strategies during social confrontations differ across two dimensions present in organizational relationships: (a) the hierarchical relationship with the unethical worker (i.e., supervisor-subordinate, peer coworker-peer coworker, subordinate-supervisor); and (b) the relational closeness with the unethical worker (i.e., friend, acquaintance, troublesome other)? We apply the communication theory of identity as a lens to understand potential differences in how participants confront a hypothetical idea thief across nine possible relational types (e.g., supervisor who is a friend, supervisor who is a troublesome other).

Confronting Unethical Behaviors and Actors in the Workplace

Individual employees are considered crucial sources of detecting, reporting, and responding to ethical violations and organizational wrongdoings as they arise (Miceli et al., 2009). The communication act of *reporting* unethical behaviors to an internal or external neutral third party (i.e., whistleblowing) has received much research attention (e.g., Lindlom, 2007; Zeng et al., 2020). However, as noted by Roloff and Paulson (2001) regarding the whistleblowing literature, "There is little analysis within that literature focused on whether the witness confronted the transgressor and, if such a confrontation occurred, what took place during the encounter" (p. 53).

A smaller but growing body of scholarship has been dedicated to understanding how employees *respond* to wrongdoings and unethical actors (e.g., Bisel et al., 2011; Ploeger et al., 2011; Valde & Henningsen, 2015). Language production experiments by Bisel et al. (2011) and Ploeger et al. (2011), for example, uncovered a hierarchical mum effect in participant responses to unethical behaviors in the workplace. The hierarchical mum effect describes how one's (in)directness in responding to an unethical request is influenced significantly by hierarchical relationship, with supervisors demonstrating the most directness in responses to unethical requests from subordinates, followed by coworkers responding to coworkers, followed by subordinates responding to supervisors. Valde and Henningsen (2015) further demonstrated the role of hierarchical power in their study about the appropriateness and effectiveness of responses to unethical behaviors, in that avoiding and off-record facework strategies were identified as the best strategies to use if confronting an unethical supervisor. Clearly, hierarchy has arisen as a pervasive factor in determining how workers confront unethical concerns and actors.

Language Choices in Social Confrontations

What do confrontations look and sound like communicatively? Newell and Stutman (1991) suggested five possible confrontation initiation behaviors (i.e., hinting, seeking confirmation, blaming or accusing, nonverbal expression of emotion, and emotional statement), which vary in message explicitness and message focus (e.g., behavior of transgressor or emotional reaction of confronter). Here, we are concerned primarily with the *degree of implicitness or explicitness* of the confrontation message content. As noted by Roloff and Paulson (2001), "confronters may be extremely indirect by hinting there is a problem, moderately indirect by asking if a problematic behavior occurred, or highly direct by blaming or accusing the transgressor of acting inappropriately" (p. 56).

Face, facework, and face-threatening actions are an inherent part of organizational life and must be acknowledged in social confrontations about unethical behavior, given that such confrontations are inherently face-threatening for the transgressor. Face, as defined by Goffman (1959), is "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken up during a particular contact" (p. 213); in other words, face is the public self-image one claims for oneself. Face is negotiated constantly through social interactions (Carson & Cupach, 2000) through preventive (prior to a face threat) or corrective (post-face threat) face*work* strategies as attempts to manage or mend the effects of face-threatening actions (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Morand, 2000).

In this study, we are primarily focused on the point of view and communication choices of the confront*er*, not the confront*ed*. Not only are humans concerned with maintaining their *own* face, but Goffman (1959) also asserted that there is an expectation to assist *others* in claiming esteemed and autonomous public self-images for themselves. It stands to reason that even though the participant is the victim of unethical behavior, other-face concern may influence a participant's linguistic choices and confrontational directness.

From a facework and politeness perspective, Brown and Levinson (1987) identified five linguistic strategies when engaging in a face-threatening action (FTA): do not do the FTA, off-record FTA, negative politeness, positive politeness, and bald on-record FTA. We consider not doing the FTA to be akin to a highly implicit confrontational strategy, while a bald on-record FTA would be highly explicit. What language implicitness-explicitness strategies will participants use when considering engaging in the FTA of confronting the unethical actor? Valde and Henningsen (2015) asserted that the confronter's language choices will depend on the nature of the transgression and the nature of the relationship between the workers. In this experiment, we consider two relationship factors that may influence confrontational directness during the unique interaction of confronting idea theft—the hierarchical relationship between the confronter and confronted and the relational closeness between the confronter and confronted.

Confronting Idea Stealing and Unjustified Credit Taking

Confronting questions and violations of idea ownership has the potential to be an especially personal and potent communicative situation. Credit in general can be seen as "a valuable commodity in organizations" (Graham & Cooper, 2013, p. 403) as credit is how work, contributions, and ideas are recognized by others in the workplace. Graham and Cooper (2013) argued that "taking credit for a work activity is an inherently ethical act" (p. 404) when the communicative act is performed in such a way that credit is duly attributed. Ideally, credit will be justified when it matches the credit receiver's contribution and is thus rightfully earned; however, credit is unjustified if the credit received exceeds the receiver's contribution and efforts. In this study, the transgressor steals the participant's ideas, presents them as the transgressor's own, and gets credit for them—a classic case of unjustified credit.

Because of the importance of ideas and credit at work, we believe that, when faced with having their idea(s) stolen, workers will directly and explicitly confront the person who has stolen them. How the wronged worker will communicatively manage this situation is potentially described by Goffman's (1959) claim: "There are occasions when individuals, whether they wish to or not, will feel obliged to destroy an interaction in order to save their honor and their face" (p. 245). For these reasons, we argue that having one's ideas stolen, no matter by whom, will be confronted directly with responses containing more other-face attacks than other-face protection attempts. Thus, we posit:

> **H1:** Across all conditions, employees confront the transgressor about the idea stealing with greater explicitness than the scale midpoint.

Hierarchical Relationships

If workers do dissent or voice criticism in the organizational setting, they may be concerned with "softening the blow" (Sias, 2009, p. 27) of negative feedback—or even withholding negative feedback—

in order to help others maintain or save face. The mum effect predicts an individual's reluctance to transmit bad or negative news for fear of being associated with the news or for fear of harming the relationship at hand (Rosen & Tesser, 1972). Milliken et al. (2003) found a mum effect present in supervisor-subordinate communication: "The most frequently mentioned reason for remaining silent was the fear of being viewed or labeled negatively, as a consequence, damaging valued relationships" (p. 1453). Such hierarchical relationships are "a defining characteristic of organizations" and "are of great consequence for employees and organization" (Sias, 2009, p. 19). In a supervisor-subordinate relationship, at least one individual (the supervisor) has formalized authority over the other (the subordinate) to assign and evaluate tasks. This power dynamic has consequences for the nature of the interactions. Sias noted that subordinates are more likely to filter information and engage in upward distortion, which is "distorting information provided to a supervisor either through lying or omission" (p. 25). Clearly, hierarchy is a potent influence on workplace communication choices. Due to the nature of supervisor-subordinate relationships, it seems that, overall, supervisors are less concerned with protecting subordinates' faces as compared to subordinates' concern about their bosses' public-images (Bisel et al., 2012). Analogously, it seems reasonable to suppose supervisors engage in more direct confrontation when the concern to protect one's own face exceeds the concern for another's face, as with being the victim of an unethical action.

A hierarchical relationship defined by the *absence* of formal power and authority is the peer coworker relationship, or "employees at the same hierarchical level who have no formal authority over one another" (Sias, 2009, p. 58). These are particularly important workplace relationships because workers tend to have many more peer relationships than supervisor-subordinate relationships (Sias & Cahill, 1998), and thus, these are the individuals with whom workers likely spend most of their time in the workplace (Comer, 1991; Sias & Perry, 2004). Because of this time aspect, Sias (2009) noted that, "the bulk of organizing, therefore, occurs in the context of coworker relationships" (p. 57). Time with peer coworkers can be spent in collaboration with one another, working on shared or interdependent tasks, exchanging work-related information, or offering instrumental support. Yet, even when team members are working in collaboration with one another, they are likely still competing with one another for opportunities for advancement and supervisor positions. For any one management position, there are likely multiple "subordinate" candidates. Thus, one's ideas—their intellectual capital, so to speak—are often what give one peer coworker an advantage over another. Hence, we would expect idea ownership and credit for one's ideas to be salient in this type of hierarchical relationship. Given the above rationale on hierarchical influences on communicative strategies in situations of contesting idea ownership, we posit:

> **H2:** Supervisors confronting subordinate transgressors are the most explicit in their responses to idea stealing, followed by coworkers confronting coworker transgressors, followed by subordinates confronting supervisor transgressors.

Relational Closeness

With the amount of time spent at work, it is understandable that workers form interpersonal relationships with supervisors, peer coworkers, and/or subordinates. The present study is not concerned with how or why relationships develop at different levels of closeness (see Fritz, 1997; Odden & Sias, 1997; Sias & Cahill, 1998; Sias & Jablin, 1995), but rather the similarities or dissimilarities that arise in one's messages when confronting issues of idea ownership with coworkers of varying closeness. Kram and Isabella (1985) identified three levels of workplace relationships that vary based on interpersonal aspects like trust and disclosure: (a) information peers, which are the most superficial and contain low breadth and depth, (b) collegial peers, which are characterized by moderation and balance of self-disclosure and trust, and (c) special peers, which are akin to "best friend" status. While Kram and Isabella originally created this typology to describe peer coworker mentoring intricacies, it has since been applied to various other workplace relationships as well.

For the purposes of this study, it is noted that Kram and Isabella's (1985) and Midooka's (1990) traditional typologies of relational distance neglect a plausible relationship in the workplace—an unpleasant, difficult relationship (labeled here as *troublesome other*). Thus, this study intends to distinguish between three distinct levels of relational closeness—troublesome other, acquaintance, and friend. Like Agne and White's (2004) findings on how friendship closeness influences facework enacted in support interactions, it is argued here that the closer workers feel toward each other interpersonally, the more they will be concerned with protecting their relationship and the offender's face.

H3: Employees who are troublesome others with the unethical actor engage in the most explicit confrontations with the transgressor, followed by those who are acquaintances with the unethical actor, followed by those who are friends with the unethical actor.

Communication Theory of Identity

In order to make sense of the data from this experiment, a robust communication theory is needed—one that readily connects the complex identities of the individual, the communicative performance, the relational context, and the organizational situation. Communication theory of identity (CTI) takes a communicative approach to understanding the reciprocal relationship between identity and communication with identity *as* communication rather than merely a product of communication or vice versa (Eckstein, 2017; Jung & Hecht, 2004). Individuals internalize social relationships and roles as identities through communication. Those identities are then acted out in social behavior through communication. In the case of the current study, we can use CTI to make sense of confrontations (or lack of confrontations) regarding idea stealing by simultaneously considering the multifaceted aspects of identity.

The four frames of identity are personal, relational, enacted, and communal (Hecht, 1993). *Personal identity* is an individual's self-image or self-concept while *enacted identity* is an individual's expressed or performed identity. *Relational identity* is shaped by communication and behaviors that take place in interpersonal relationships, such as a romantic couple (Jung & Hecht, 2004), peer coworkers, or a supervisor-subordinate. The final identity frame is *communal identity*. Communal identity transcends individuals and is characteristic of a group or collective. Because Jung and Hecht (2004) described collectives as those who define their identities based on shared characteristics, organizations can be positioned within the communal frame (see Compton, 2016), making CTI particularly useful for this study.

While frames can be considered independent of one another for analytical purposes, they are not separate from one another. The frames offer a perspective on a whole and integrated identity. At times, the frames are clearly integrated with one another while at other times the frames seem to contradict. For example, as shown in a study by Paxman (2021), vegans wanting to combat a negative communal identity attempted to do so at the enacted layer of identity; thus, these individuals used one frame of identity to challenge or contest another undesirable frame of identity.

One way to better understand interpenetration is through Jung and Hecht's (2004) concept of *identity gap*s, or discrepancies between or among the frames of identity. Identity gaps are almost inevitable given the imperfect and complicated nature of communication and relationships. Identity gaps cause dissonance and lead individuals to negotiate how they communicate aspects of their identity based on the context or relationship. Some identity gaps are not easily negotiated and can lead to decreased feelings of being understood, lower communication satisfaction, and lower perceptions of conversational appropriateness and effectiveness (Jung & Hecht, 2004). In a study by Compton (2016), mixed messages between management, coworkers, and policy created a relational-communal gap for employees attempting to manage their sexual identity in the workplace that was particularly challenging and for some employees meant they had to hide aspects of their identity within the organization, or at least with certain people with the organization. For the current study, it is feasible that identity gaps caused by the

inability to reconcile identity frames may lead organizational actors to respond to idea stealing in ways that might not otherwise be predicted.

Methods

This study focused on the communicative strategies working adults produce when they confront a transgressor about presenting one's ideas as the transgressor's own. Here, linguistic confrontation strategies that one employs when responding to an unethical actor's behavior are referred to as confrontationality. Confrontationality exists on a continuum of no confrontation/highly implicit confrontation to highly explicit confrontation.

Participants

A sample of 326 full-time working adults participated in this language production experiment. Participants included 165 males and 157 females (four participants did not identify their sex), ranging in age from 21 to 70 years of age ($M = 41.97$, $SD = 12.41$). Respondents lived in 29 states within the United States; one participant lived in Australia. Participants' education levels ranged from an earned high school diploma to an earned doctorate, with a bachelor's degree being the most common educational level obtained (34%). Participants' total work experience ranged from six months to 48 years ($M = 20.92$, $SD = 13.20$), while work experience at their current organizations ranged from being a new member of their organization (employed there less than one month) to 42 years ($M = 12.47$, $SD = 12.18$).

Procedures and Design

Once approval was granted from the Institutional Review Board, full-time working adults from a variety of career fields were recruited to participate in the study through a solicitation email sent by the researcher. Upon receipt of the email, these individuals were also asked to forward the solicitation email to five other working adults. Then, those five individuals forwarded the email to an additional five working adults and so on. All potential participants were directed to an online survey hosted by Qualtrics. The study proceeded as a 3 (hierarchical position: subordinate, coworker, supervisor) X 3 (relational closeness: troublesome other, acquaintance, friend) factorial design experiment.

Scenarios

Participants were randomly assigned to one of nine conditions. Participants responded in the first person to Casey (a gender-neutral idea thief) after Casey presented the participant's ideas as their own during a meeting, as though it were a real situation. Participants crafted their responses to the unethical actor in a dialogue box; responses were not restricted to a minimum or maximum length. While the transgression (i.e., idea stealing and subsequent unjustified credit) was the same across conditions, the scenarios differed on three levels of the two independent variables: hierarchical relationship between the participant and the unethical actor (subordinate-supervisor, peer coworker-peer coworker, supervisor-subordinate) and relational closeness with the unethical actor (troublesome other, acquaintance, friend). For example, scenario one described Casey as a supervisor who is also a troublesome other to the participant. In scenario two, Casey is a supervisor who was depicted as an acquaintance. In the third scenario, Casey is still a supervisor, but participants assigned to this condition consider Casey as a friend. The remaining scenarios continued in the same fashion, but Casey was described as a coworker (for scenarios four through six) or a subordinate (for scenarios seven through nine). See Table 1 for the number of participants assigned randomly to each condition.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Confrontationality by Hierarchical Position and Relational Closeness

Hierarchical Position	Relational Closeness	Confrontationality	
		M	*SD*
Supervisor to Subordinate	Troublesome Other (*n* = 32)	2.09	1.20
	Acquaintance (*n* = 39)	2.46	1.47
	Friend (*n* = 40)	2.40	1.41
	Total (*n* = 111)	2.33	1.37
Coworker to Coworker	Troublesome Other (*n* = 41)	2.98	1.37
	Acquaintance (*n* = 42)	2.69	1.09
	Friend (*n* = 37)	2.70	1.05
	Total (*n* = 120)	2.79	1.18
Subordinate to Supervisor	Troublesome Other (*n* = 30)	1.80	1.19
	Acquaintance (*n* = 38)	1.89	1.33
	Friend (*n* = 27)	1.63	1.21
	Total (*n* = 95)	1.79	1.25
Total	Troublesome Other (*n* = 103)	2.36	1.36
	Acquaintance (*n* = 119)	2.36	1.33
	Friend (*n* = 104)	2.29	1.30
	Total Participants (*n* = 326)	2.34	1.33

Manipulation Check

Twelve working adults participated in a manipulation check in order to verify that participants likely perceived distinctions between the hierarchical positions and relational closeness levels in the conditions, and whether the behavior discussed in the scenario was perceived as unethical. The manipulation check confirmed that each manipulation was perceived as intended.

Content Analysis

A content analysis was performed on all 326 responses. Each response was coded for level of confrontationality by assessing facework strategies within participants' responses. Each response was given only one code.

Training and Coding Scheme Development

Fifteen working adults were solicited for participation in a pilot study in order to: (a) begin the development of a coding scheme for linguistic confrontationality, and (b) investigate and confirm the presence of initial confrontationality differences between conditions. Participants received one of four— of the total nine included in the full study—scenarios and were asked to respond to Casey as though it was a real situation. The four scenarios were selected because they were the most opposite conditions, in

that they represented the highest and lowest levels of hierarchical relationships (i.e., subordinate to supervisor, supervisor to subordinate) and relational closeness (i.e., troublesome other, friend).

Drawing upon previous facework scholarship as well as other language production experiments (Bisel et al., 2011; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Penman, 1990; Ploeger et al., 2011; Waldron & Krone, 1991), a coding scheme was originated for the purposes of this study. Two coders underwent two rounds of training. Coders read and reread two selections of responses (at time one: the 15 responses from the pilot study; at time two: a subset of 33 cases selected randomly from the full study data) to identify recurrent confrontational strategies in a process similar to open-coding in constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In order to open-code, coders identified and labeled each confrontational strategy and looked for similar and dissimilar examples throughout the selected data. Once open-coding was completed, recurrent patterns were well-established—enough so that no new strategy examples could be found in the selected response-sets. The coders then used these open-codes as a means of developing a content analytic scheme by ordering codes from least to most confrontational, a process parallel to axial-coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

At the completion of this process, coders identified five levels of confrontational directness or explicitness, ranging from 0 (*no confrontation/highly implicit confrontation*), 1 (*implicit confrontation*), 2 (*balanced confrontation*), 3 (*explicit confrontation*), and 4 (*highly explicit confrontation*). Then, the two coders selected yet another 34 cases randomly (from the full study data) to determine initial intercoder reliability. Krippendorff's α was computed for both initial interrater reliability, and interrater reliability at the end of coding (the latter referred to as coder drift). Interrater coding reliability was sufficiently high ($\alpha = .89$); a measure of coder drift was also sufficiently high ($\alpha = .85$).

An utterance was assigned a score of "0-no confrontation/highly implicit confrontation" when the response contained only face protection(s) and/or the presence of a deniable, off-record face attack. Those responses coded as "1-implicit confrontation" contained more protection attempts than face attacks. Those responses receiving a score of "2-balanced confrontation" included a balance of face protections and face attacks. Responses that were coded as "3-explicit confrontation" included more face attacks than face protection attempts. Ultimatums were often present in these responses, but the response overall included an element of face protection, even if minor. Responses that involved highly explicit confrontation were assigned a "4" and included blatant face aggravation, no face protection attempts, and no redressive action.

Results

H1: Confrontational Directness about Idea Stealing

A one sample *t*-test was conducted to test the first hypothesis, which predicted that employees—regardless of experimental condition—confront the transgressor about the idea stealing with greater explicitness than the scale midpoint. Results of the *t*-test revealed that across all experimental conditions, employees confronted the hypothetical transgressor about the idea stealing with explicitness ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.33$) greater than the scale midpoint of 2.0 (balanced confrontation), $t(325) = 4.68$, $p < .001$. Thus, H1 was supported.

H2 and H3: Hierarchical Position, Relational Closeness, and Confrontational Explicitness

A 3 (subordinate, coworker, supervisor) X 3 (troublesome other, acquaintance, friend) factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted in order to test the second and third hypotheses.

Hierarchical Position and Confrontational Explicitness
The second hypothesis predicted that supervisors-confronting-subordinates would be the most explicit in their confrontations about idea stealing followed by peer coworkers followed by subordinates-confronting-supervisors. Results of the ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for hypothesis one

concerning linguistic confrontational strategies and hierarchical condition, $F(2, 317) = 16.70$, $p < .001$, η^2 = .09. In order to determine group differences in confrontational explicitness across hierarchical positions, Tukey HSD post hoc tests were performed to correct for Type I error rate. Post hoc tests revealed a significant difference in confrontationality between subordinates responding to supervisors ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.25$) and coworkers responding to coworkers ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.18$), $p < .001$. There was also a significant difference between subordinates responding to supervisors and supervisors responding to subordinates ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.37$), $p < .05$. Finally, there was also a significant difference between supervisors responding to subordinates and coworkers responding to coworkers, $p < .05$. In other words, post hoc tests revealed that coworkers used significantly more explicit confrontational strategies than did supervisors or subordinates. Also, supervisors were significantly more explicit with their use of linguistic confrontational strategies when responding to the subordinate-offender than were subordinates responding to a supervisor-offender. Subordinates were indeed the most likely to abstain from direct confrontation, to use more protective attempts, and invoke implicit confrontationality in their responses. Coworkers were the most explicit in their confrontations.

Relational Closeness and Confrontational Explicitness

The third hypothesis predicted that employees who consider the idea stealer to be a troublesome other respond with the most explicit confrontations, followed by those who are acquaintances with the transgressor, followed by those who are friends with the unethical actor. Results of the ANOVA did not reveal a significant main effect for relational closeness and linguistic confrontational strategies, $F(2, 317)$ = .19, *n.s.* These data did not support the notion that confrontationality will differ with regard to closeness. In other words, without considering hierarchical positions, it did not seem to matter (significantly) if the offender was a troublesome other ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.36$), acquaintance ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.33$), or friend ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.30$). Participants tended to produce balanced confrontation (with a slight lean toward explicitness) in their responses to the unethical actor.

Interaction

While no interaction effect was hypothesized, it is worth noting that the results of the 3 X 3 ANOVA did not reveal a significant interaction between hierarchical position and relational closeness, $F(4, 317) = .84$, *n.s.* Mean scores for confrontational explicitness across the nine conditions are in *Table 1*.

Discussion

Idea stealing and unjustified credit taking are understudied unethical behaviors in the workplace (Graham & Cooper, 2013; Ploeger-Lyons & Bisel, in press). The present study sought to understand this ethical transgression from the lenses of social confrontations and communication theory of identity. The specific goals of this language production experiment were three-fold: (a) to determine overall confrontational explicitness in working adults' responses to idea stealers; (b) to determine the role of hierarchical positioning in shaping confrontations with idea stealers; and (c) to determine the influence of relational closeness with an unethical actor in responses to the transgression.

As predicted, workers across all experimental conditions responded to the transgressor/idea stealer with confrontations that were more balanced to explicit rather than implicit. The participant mean score of 2.34 for confrontation explicitness falls on our coding scheme between a "2-balanced confrontation" (i.e., balanced face protections and face attacks) and a "3-explicit confrontation" (i.e., more face attacks than face protections, but still protected face). In other words, regardless of hierarchical condition or relational closeness condition, participants formed responses to Casey, the unethical actor, that in some way protected Casey's face (even if minor) but *also* contained direct, explicit communications and in some cases, clear face attacks (e.g., "Casey, you stole my presentation..."). Our data, in tandem with Goffman's (1959) decades-old claim that, "There are some occasions when

individuals, whether they wish to or not, will feel obliged to destroy an interaction in order to save their honor and their face" (p. 245), point to idea stealing in the workplace as one such occasion.

When considering the role hierarchical position may play in confrontation explicitness, the overall effect of hierarchical relationships on the explicitness of confrontations was statistically significant and moderate ($\eta^2 = .09$). Though supervisors were predicted to use the most explicit confrontational language when confronting a subordinate idea thief, it was peer coworkers who responded to peer coworker idea thieves with the most explicit confrontations. Supervisors responding to subordinates were less explicit than peer coworkers but were still more explicit than subordinates responding to supervisors. Restated, peer coworkers' ratio of face attacks to face protections was significantly greater than both supervisors and subordinates.

Consistent with our prediction, subordinates' confrontations contained the most implicit language, the fewest face attacks, and the most other-face protection attempts. These findings resonate with the hierarchical mum effect (Ploeger et al., 2011), which asserts that subordinates use indirectness as a means to avoid threatening supervisors' face, especially when concerning unethical behaviors. In the case of the present experiment regarding idea theft, it seems subordinates again use equivocation and implicit language, thereby reducing the clarity and directness of their responses to supervisors about the ethical transgression. For example, rather than saying, "You stole my ideas" (i.e., a face attack and highly explicit confrontation), subordinates' responses were more likely to contain protective and implicit language, phrasing objections in ways like, "What just happened?" or "I'm confused about what happened during the meeting." Implicit confrontations like these delay assigning ethical meaning to idea stealing and may be a maladaptive strategy (Brown & Starkey, 2000) when considering ethics talk. If blame is not assigned, the offender may either knowingly continue or remain ignorant of the moral nature of their actions and the effect the actions had on the wronged person (Bird, 1996).

Communication theory of identity (CTI) (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004) provides further insight into the use of implicit language when subordinates confront supervisors regarding idea stealing. Recall that there are four frames of identity: personal, relational, enacted, and communal (Hecht, 1993), and that identity gaps form when there are discrepancies between identity frames (Jung & Hecht, 2004). When individuals experience identity gaps, they must communicatively manage aspects of their identity related to the context or the relationship in which they are involved. In organizational life, there is often a tension between the relational and communal frames. For example, Compton (2016) argued that a manager in the relational frame could dismiss or ignore a communal frame that helped sexual minorities, which in turn impacted how employees could enact their personal frame sexual identities. Organizational policies and organizational culture (communal frame) also have the power to structure the communicative environment and create boundaries regarding employees' freedom of identity expression (Cooren, 2004). When ideas are stolen, an identity gap is created between the relational and communal frames. Explicit language use in a confrontation by a subordinate with a supervisor regarding idea stealing might satisfy the relational frame needs but implicit language use attends to the communal frame. When confronted with this identity gap, employees ultimately resolve the dissonance or gap between the identity frames by attending to the louder or more prevalent frame (communal, in this case) by doing what they know how to do best in organizations. In other words, subordinates know how to perform *being subordinate*, which means not explicitly confronting the idea stealing committed by their supervisor, and thereby communicatively managing the identity gap.

CTI forwards the notion that the identity process involves content and relational level messages and both subjective and ascribed meaning. Eckstein's (2019) study demonstrated that victims of partner violence rarely utilized only one message to construct larger narratives to rationalize to others their decisions to stay in an abusive relationship while simultaneously reinforcing their own identities in ways that avoided contradiction. As an employee considers confronting a supervisor regarding idea stealing, content and relational level messages around organizational culture, workplace socialization, and larger societal narratives about work relationships and interactions will influence the message and identity the employee constructs and ultimately communicates within the organization. In this way, CTI readily

explains why organizational members will resolve the identity gaps they are experiencing and will lean on the communal frame, which is how they have been socialized organizationally and culturally.

But why is the peer coworker-peer coworker the hierarchical relationship that used the most explicit confrontations? As noted by Ploeger et al. (2011), while "subordinates are *especially* reluctant to confront their supervisors' wrongdoing...coworkers may be as direct as supervisors in confronting wrongdoing" (p. 476). In the present study, peer coworkers' confrontations included the most direct language and other-face attacks. It is important to note that peer coworkers are status-equivalent relationships in the workplace; thus, their motivation to use or avoid explicit confrontational language is not due to a formal, hierarchical power imbalance (i.e., a communal frame). While a peer coworker is *not* especially reliant on coworkers for their "daily bread" or for promotion opportunities (like subordinates are with supervisors), peer coworkers may be those individuals with whom employees are in greatest competition with for promotion opportunities, public recognition for ideas, merit raises, and so on. Thus, for a peer to receive unjustified credit for someone else's ideas is a particularly high-stakes workplace situation; that idea might just be one that recognizes them as a viable candidate for promotion or something similar. Thus, explicit confrontations, face attacks, and direct communication are particularly common in peer coworker interactions about questions of idea ownership.

From a CTI perspective, since peer coworkers are not as reliant on coworkers for organizational rewards as they are on supervisors, they may experience less dissonance between the relational and communal frames when confronting peer coworkers about idea stealing. This relative lack of identity gap explains why workers are more willing to be explicit with peer coworkers. When confronting a peer coworker, their relational identity expression does not contradict typical communal frames that promote competition and self-promotion. In fact, the communal identity frame (that many workers have been socialized into in modern organizational life) privileges individual achievement. When corporate recognition of individual achievement is threatened due to peer coworker idea stealing, explicit confrontation (relational frame) of the transgressor is supported by the communal frame, which is not the case when the transgressor is a supervisor.

The final hypothesis in this experiment posited a relationship between relational closeness and confrontational responses. Our hypothesis was solidly unsupported; there were no significant differences in confrontational language used between workers of different relational closeness levels. It did not matter (statistically) whether the offender was a troublesome other ($M = 2.36$), a mere acquaintance ($M = 2.36$), or a friend ($M = 2.29$) who presented a worker's ideas as the offender's own. Across relational conditions, workers' responses to the transgressor were characterized by balanced to slightly explicit confrontation.

Interpersonal relationships may serve as sources of support, information exchange, and sensemaking in the workplace (Sias, 2009; Weick, 1995, 2001). However, while it is likely for relationships to form in the workplace due to close proximity, frequent contact, and shared tasks (Sias, 2009; Sias & Cahill, 1998), the development of friendships in the workplace—similar to friendships outside of the workplace—remains voluntary, not obligatory. Thus, it is natural for working adults to develop and maintain relationships of varying levels of closeness in their jobs. The very nature of these relationships—and the specific operationalization of them in this study—is indicative of different communication patterns and behaviors. However, those differences do not necessarily translate into communication differences in this study. In order to understand why this might be the case, attention must be paid to the importance of context in the meaning-making process—both the context of the workplace and the context of the unethical act of idea stealing.

While workplace friendships resemble non-workplace friendships in many ways, it seems that the context of the workplace distinguishes them. As noted by Sias (2009), "Workplace friendships are literally defined by the context in which they exist—the workplace" (p. 104). As such, a friend that someone meets through work may always be just that—a friend met through work. Thus, while it was predicted that more attempts would be made to protect the face of a workplace friend than an acquaintance or a troublesome other—as may likely be the case with non-workplace friends, acquaintances, and troublesome others—there were no detectable differences in the confrontationality with which working adults responded to the offender.

It is important to emphasize that blended relationships (part professional, part personal—part coworker, part friend) (Bridge & Baxter, 1992) may develop across all levels of the hierarchy. Yet, the results of this study suggest that when a hierarchical element is added to interpersonal relationships, hierarchy prevails as the more potent context for shaping communication strategies. A significant main effect was found for hierarchical position, but no main effect was found for relational closeness (nor the interaction). These results support the notion that in cases of unethical organizational behaviors, the context of hierarchy trumps the context of relational closeness or the interaction between them in shaping confrontationality, perhaps in part because, "Workplace relationships do not exist in isolation from the workplace itself…the workplace context impacts friendships among employees" (Sias, 2009, p. 104).

Limitations and Future Directions

Participants in this language production experiment were assigned randomly into one of nine conditions, with the same unethical action across conditions. While we discovered what participants reported they would say in response to the standardized unethical action of idea theft, such internal control needs to be supplemented by designs that maximize ecological validity. Future research could solicit retrospective accounts of how workers—as the victims of unethical behavior—responded. Additionally, a method that allows researchers to identify emotion in participants' paralinguistic delivery would add depth to understanding workers' responses beyond what we can discern from the written communication obtained here. Additional directions in this line of research could also explore confronters' *motivations* for confronting (or choosing not to confront) the idea stealer, particularly in light of face motivations, perceived importance or significance of the idea, and perceptions of teamwork and shared ownership of ideas. In this study, participants were assigned to a specific hierarchical role (subordinate, coworker, supervisor), which may or may not have been reflective of their actual work experience. Subsequent analyses should analyze the relationship between work experience and supervisory experience to determine whether confrontationality differences exist with respect to these two variables. Future studies also ought to assess the participants' perceived relational closeness with the unethical actor *after* the incident occurred. Additionally, though relational closeness was not found to be significant in this study, it should not be disregarded altogether as a potential influential variable in other studies.

Sias (2009) recommended that scholars ought to begin to study interaction processes and conversations between working adults to better understand the communicative patterns characteristic of workplace relationships. Thus, future research might be more dyadic in nature and investigate the offender's response to the victim. This study utilized a unique communication confrontationality coding scheme and provided results that speak to *descriptions* of workers' confrontationality when responding to an unethical action. Future studies ought to assess confrontationality and *effectiveness*, which would provide the opportunity to develop *prescriptive* communicative recommendations when workers encounter similar unethical behaviors in various hierarchical and relational closeness contexts. Lastly, the ethical (or unethical) decisions employees make on a daily basis have relevance indubitably to their organization's culture. From the perspective of system-level functioning, it would be provocative to study empirically how *seemingly* minor unethical instances such as the one in this study accumulate over time to influence trust in other workers and the overall (un)ethical culture of an organization.

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