The Emotion-Evoked Collective Corruption Model: The Role of Emotion in the Spread of Corruption within Organizations

Kristin Smith-Crowe
University of Utah

Danielle E. Warren
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

We draw from research on emotions and moral reasoning to develop a process model of collective corruption that centers on the role of moral emotions in the spread of corruption within organizations. Our focus on a well-intentioned and deliberative path to corruption is a departure from previous theory which has focused on mindless and ill-intentioned paths. In our model, moral emotions play a critical role in both the initial recruitment of a target individual (the direct process), as well as the spread of corruption to a broader group of non-targeted individuals through emotional contagion (the vicarious process). For both processes we explain how self-directed moral emotions (guilt, shame, embarrassment, and pride) facilitate the spread of corruption, and how other-directed moral emotions (anger and contempt) do not. We conclude by discussing the implications of our theory and directions for future research.

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Wrongdoing in organizations is prevalent, costly, and ongoing, with almost half of American employees recently surveyed having observed misconduct in their organizations (Ethics Resource Center 2012). Collective corruption, defined as coordinated wrongdoing that organizational members carry out on behalf of the organization (Pinto et al. 2008), is an especially problematic sub-category of wrongdoing that has been associated with numerous high-profile scandals. Whereas the broader literature on wrongdoing focuses largely on the question of why individuals engage in wrongdoing (e.g., Jones 1991; Sonenshein 2007; Treviño 1986; Reynolds 2006a, 2006b), a key question in the collective corruption literature is how does wrongdoing spread across individuals such that they come to work together to do wrong in the name of the organization? As Ashforth et al. (2008, p. 671) put it, “The concept of corruption reflects not just the corrupt behavior of any single individual...but also the dangerous, viruslike ‘infection’ of a group, organization, or industry.” Yet Greve and colleagues (2010)
concluded that relatively little research addresses the problem of the spread of corruption within organizations. Moore’s (2009, p. 36-37) description of this literature is similar: “…corruption has less often been studied as a process, even though the true puzzles we need to unravel in order to understand (and undo) corruption are about the processes that deliver corruption, rather than the end result of those processes…”

Further, existing process theories have focused on how corruption “…proliferates throughout an organization largely through processes that can be considered mindless…”, or of a mechanical character (Greve et al. 2010, p. 76), and on how corruption may be motivated by self-interest (Palmer 2008). In contrast, we are interested in how well-intentioned, thoughtful organizational members might come to engage in collective corruption. Based on the increasing convergence of evidence across disciplines suggesting that moral reasoning is inextricably linked to emotional capacity (e.g., Greene et al. 2001, Greene and Haidt 2002, Haidt 2001, Sonenshein 2007, 2009, Warren and Smith-Crowe 2008), we focus on the central role that moral emotions can play in propagating corruption. We argue that emotion can play an important role in recruiting an individual into participating in corruption, and that emotional contagion can draw people in beyond those directly targeted for recruitment. In this way, emotional contagion can help to explain the rapid spread of corruption.

In what follows, we summarize existing theory on how collective corruption spreads in organizations. Next, we develop theory for an “emotion-evoked” pathway by which it can spread. Because the role of moral emotions in moral reasoning is central to our argument, we begin by discussing the nature and function of moral emotions and their susceptibility to influence in organizational contexts. Then, we present our emotion-evoked corruption model. We start with an instance of an individual engaging in behavior that in a broader context would be considered moral, but in the context of a particular organization is considered immoral because it interferes with the organization’s corrupt practices. We argue that when these individuals are the targets of criticism for their “transgressions” (as defined by the organization), they are likely to respond emotionally – with self-directed emotions (guilt, shame, or embarrassment) or other-directed emotions (anger or contempt). These emotions may be “caught” by observers. We further argue that, depending on the type of emotion elicited, the content and outcomes of their ensuing moral reasoning will differ such that inwardly directed emotions are likely to promote the spread of collective corruption, and outwardly directed emotions are not.

**Existing Research on the Spread of Collective Corruption**

Collective corruption is typically regarded as a top-down process whereby leaders either directly or implicitly encourage their subordinates to engage in wrongdoing (Ashforth and Anand 2003, Brown et al. 2005). The identified reasons for subordinates’ compliance entail a lack of awareness of doing wrong, mindlessness, habituation, and incentives (e.g., Ashforth and Anand 2003, Butterfield et al. 2000, Greve et al. 2010, Moore 2009, Palmer 2008, Reynolds 2006a). For example, reward structures may both incentivize and legitimize corrupt behaviors (Ashforth and Anand 2003). In other cases, subordinates may see the directives and desires of their leaders as naturally legitimate, and thus beyond reproach (Brief et al. 2001, Strudler and Warren 2001). Further, Ashforth and

In past research, corruption has been posited to spread via institutionalization (Brief et al. 2001, Moore 2009); Ashforth and Anand (2003) argued that institutionalization begins with an initial corrupt behavior, which subsequently becomes part of an organization’s structure and process. For instance, behavior that is rewarded eventually becomes a matter of routine and is perpetuated through socialization. Likewise, newcomers may be eased into wrongdoing incrementally, thereby masking their descent into corruption; they also may experience an escalation of commitment toward wrongdoing (see also Brief et al. 2001). Importantly, existing theory on collective corruption focuses on the de-emphasis of the moral attributes of a situation, reinterpretation of the situation for the newcomer, or inducement of corruption through rewards. However, given recent findings across fields, it is important to consider both cognition and emotion as important factors in collective corruption. Furthermore, our theory explains how employees can fall prey to corruption even while believing they are doing what is morally right. In short, we present our approach as not only a possible avenue to collective corruption, but also as a complementary one that may improve the efficacy of existing process theories on collective corruption.

The Role of Moral Emotions in the Spread of Collective Corruption

Here we draw on research across disciplinary boundaries to develop a process model of the spread of corruption. We argue that organizational members who identify with their organization are likely to feel guilt, shame, or embarrassment when rebuked for actions that are inconsistent with ongoing corrupt practices. Such emotional reactions are likely to lead to a greater alignment between individuals’ thinking and feeling (i.e., moral judgments and affective residue – outcomes of the moral reasoning process) and these corrupt practices, in turn making future participation in collective corruption more likely. Praise for subsequent participation may lead to a sense of pride, reinforcing thinking and feeling aligned with corrupt practices. In contrast, we argue that individuals who do not particularly identify with their organization are likely to feel anger and contempt when reprimanded for the same actions. These emotions are not likely to lead to individuals’ thinking and feeling aligning with corrupt practices, and thus are not likely to lead to the spread of corruption. Observers who “catch” these emotions are likely to respond similarly to individuals directly targeted for rebuke. Below we detail each step of the emotion-evoked corruption model. We begin with a fine-grained analysis of moral emotions. Next, we apply this knowledge, explaining how these emotions can act to promote collective corruption.
**Moral Emotions and Moral Reasoning**

A preponderance of evidence suggests an overlapping of our moral and emotional lives (for reviews see Greene and Haidt 2002, Moll et al. 2005, 2008, Salvador and Folger 2009). Much of this evidence comes in one of two forms: evidence of a correspondence between deficits in emotional and moral capacities (Krajbich et al. 2009, Moll and de Oliveira-Souza 2007, van den Bos and Gurogulu 2009), and evidence of morally relevant stimuli evoking activity in the emotion centers of normal brains (Heekeren et al. 2003, Moll et al. 2008). As an example of the former type of evidence, in case studies of two adults who suffered frontal lobe damage before the age of 16 months, researchers found that their lack of emotional capacity corresponded to their lack of moral capacity (Anderson et al. 1999). Described as suffering from a syndrome resembling psychopathy, the patients exhibited behavior like lying and stealing, as well as neglectful parenting—all without any evidence of guilt or empathy. The second type of evidence (activation in normal brains as a response to moral stimuli) also demonstrates a connection between morality and emotion. For instance, Moll and his colleagues (2002, cf. Robertson et al. 2007) found that moral judgment entailed activation of brain areas associated with emotion (the orbital and medial prefrontal cortex and the superior temporal sulcus).

Given this evidence, we contend that an understanding of micro-processes entailing emotion and moral reasoning can facilitate our understanding of collective corruption. Here we discuss research on the nature of moral emotions and their role in the moral reasoning process, which will serve as the foundation for our subsequent arguments.

**Nature of moral emotions.** Emotions are discrete, have objects, entail both feeling and thinking, and can occur rapidly (e.g., Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, Baumeister et al. 2007, Elfenbein 2007, Grandey 2008, Keltner and Lerner 2010, Prinz 2004, Schacter and Singer 1962). Lindquist and Barrett (2008) describe emotions as physiological states that are imbued with meaning (cf. Schacter and Singer 1962). Emotion is a way for us to see the value of things (de Sousa 1987), including whether things are moral or immoral, and whether we or others are responsible for them (Barrett et al. 2007). Along the same lines, Elfenbein (2007) argued that the experience of emotion entails a sense-making process that incorporates input from the social environment. Moral emotions, as a subcategory of emotions, claim these general characteristics with the difference that their objects are morally relevant. They are concerned with social relations, “…real, imagined, anticipated, or remembered encounters with people” (Leary 2000, p. 331), particularly with violations of the social (and hence, moral) order (Rozin et al. 1999, Baumeister et al. 1994). Here we consider self- and other-directed moral emotions that are positively and negatively valenced.

Self-directed moral emotions include guilt, shame, and embarrassment and indicate to those experiencing them that they have done wrong (Haidt 2003, Lewis 1992, Rozin et al. 1999, Tracy and Robins 2004, Warren and Smith-Crowe 2008). Guilt is behavior-specific (i.e., one feels guilty about a specific behavior rather than evaluating the global self negatively), while shame is elicited by transgressions for which the global self is blamed (Baumeister et al. 1994, Tangney 1990, 1991, Tangney et al. 2007, Tracy and Robins 2006); both are in response to violations of one’s own standards. Embarrassment,
in contrast, occurs in response to more inadvertent moral lapses (Keltner and Buswell 1997, Parrott and Smith 1991, Warren and Smith-Crowe 2008). These emotions tend to result in prosocial actions like appeasement behaviors, which involve complying with the desires and directives of those who trigger or witness the experience of a moral emotion (Apsler 1975, Baumeister et al. 1994, 1995, Haidt 2003, Keltner and Buswell 1997, Levin and Arluke 1982, Tangney et al. 2007). Different from research on guilt and embarrassment, previous research suggests that shame may lead to withdrawal rather than appeasement (Tangney et al. 2007), yet more recent research distinguishes different dimensions of shame and finds that some dimensions are associated with positive responses (Cohen et al. 2011, de Hooge et al. 2010, Gausel et al. 2012). Interestingly, prosocial reactions to shame, guilt, and embarrassment may not be moral. Gino and Pierce (2009) demonstrated that when participants felt guilty due to wealth-based inequity, they were more likely to engage in “dishonest helping” behavior (i.e., overreporting the productivity of another student in a lab task so the other student would receive more compensation).

Apart from guilt, shame, and embarrassment is the self-directed but positively valenced emotion of pride. Pride is “…generated by appraisals that one is responsible for a socially valued outcome …” (Mascolo and Fischer 1995, p. 66). Similarly, Tracy and Robins (2007, p. 507) termed authentic pride that which “…is typically based on specific accomplishments and is likely accompanied by genuine feelings of self-worth.” Tangney et al. (2007) argued that since pride is based on conforming to social standards of worth or merit, it likely serves a motivational function: promoting behavior deemed ethical and inhibiting behavior deemed unethical.

Other-directed moral emotions include anger and contempt, and indicate that others have done wrong (Melwani and Barsade 2011, Rozin et al. 1999). Anger results from threats to the self (Hutcherson and Gross 2011) and violations of autonomy (Gutierrez and Giner-Sorolla 2007, Rozin et al. 1999), particularly those that are intentional (Russell and Giner-Sorolla 2011a). Contempt results from others’ incompetence (Hutcherson and Gross 2011) and violations of community (Melwani and Barsade 2011, Rozin et al. 1999). For instance, target individuals might become angry if they sense that others are interfering with their right to manage their own work or are threatening or attacking them; alternatively, they might feel contempt if they sense that others are disrespecting them or are incompetent. While anger is tied to aggression and attempts to change the target of the anger, contempt is tied with distancing oneself from the target of the contempt (e.g., Fischer and Roseman 2007).

**Function of moral emotions.** Moral emotions have two important functions in the process of moral reasoning: (1) the moral reasoning process can begin with a moral emotion, and (2) moral emotions can facilitate ongoing reasoning by distinguishing between ethical and unethical options. Leary (2000) argued that in an evolutionary sense, the survival of human beings has depended on association and cooperation, and that one aspect of our emotional capacity is to detect whether other people accept or devalue us. These emotions then facilitate cognitive processing (Baumeister et al. 2007). Experiencing emotions like embarrassment and shame indicate to us that there is a problem, that we are being devalued by others (Leary 2000), prompting our reflection on
what we may have done wrong (see also Ashforth and Saks 2002). For instance, Baumeister and his colleagues (1995) found that guilt prompted learning about right and wrong. Conversely, experiencing pride indicates that we have behaved admirably and may prompt us to engage in moral reasoning as we reflect on the good we have done. Further, experiencing anger or contempt indicates that others have done wrong to us, prompting reflection on others’ misdeeds. Indeed, Russell and Giner-Sorolla (2011b) found that it is relatively easy for individuals to provide reasons to justify their anger.

Once moral reasoning is initiated, moral emotions continue to play a critical role by directing our attention to relevant factors and options, and helping us to evaluate them (e.g., Roberts et al. 2005). Baumeister et al. (2007, cf. Damasio 1994) explained this process in terms of “affective residue,” which they argued is a learned association from our past mistakes and successes, or those of others in the case of social learning. That is, negative self-directed emotions become linked to past mistakes and positive self-directed emotions become linked to past successes (see also Tangney et al. 2007) so that when the mistakes or successes are recalled, the associated affect is also recalled. Likewise, other-directed emotions become linked to others’ transgressions.

Importantly, when we find ourselves deliberating over an issue, moral emotions help us to distinguish moral from immoral options. For instance, using guilt as an example, Baumeister et al. (2007, p. 173) theorized that having done something in the past that made one feel guilty, one will likely feel a “twinge of guilty affect” (i.e., affective residue) when considering engaging in that same behavior again. Because we typically want to pursue positive and avoid negative experiences, twinges of guilt help us quickly eliminate presumably bad options (cf. Cohen et al. 2012). In this case guilt serves as an “interrupt mechanism” that can stop or redirect behavior (Baumeister et al. 1995, p. 188), what Warren and Smith-Crowe (2008) called an internal sanction. Similarly, Fourie et al. (2011) found that experimentally induced guilt was associated with self-reported behavioral inhibition sensitivity and they argued that as such, guilt serves as a punishment cue. In contrast, other-directed negative emotions serve the function of indicating that it is others who are exhibiting problematic behavior. Such associated affect reduces the likelihood of our adopting the behavior of others. Pride similarly reduces the likelihood of a change in behavior because it reinforces an existing course of action. Consistent with our reasoning, the appraisal tendency theory of emotion says that emotions influence individuals’ judgment and decision-making because they promote judgments and decisions that are consistent with the emotions being experienced (Keltner and Lerner 2010).

Thus, it is the connection between moral emotion and moral reasoning that defines the influence of moral emotion on behavior. Anger, contempt, and pride are not likely to motivate a change in behavior; guilt, shame, and embarrassment are. Though we do not assume that we always choose to act on what we believe to be morally right (cf. Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe 2008), moral judgment has been demonstrated to correlate with ethical intention and behavior (for reviews see O’Fallon and Butterfield 2005, Treviño et al. 2006), and emotion has been demonstrated to motivate behavior (e.g., de Quervain et al. 2004). In other words, to say that moral emotions are part of the moral reasoning process is to say that moral emotions influence behavior.
**Moral emotions in an organizational context.** An implication of the discussion thus far is that our emotional repertoire continuously develops as new associations arise between emotions and the events in our lives (e.g., de Sousa 1987). In other words, our capacity for emotion develops in a social context; as such, emotions are social phenomena (see also Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, Ashforth and Kreiner 2002, Solomon 2004, Vasquez et al. 2001). Below, in laying out our theoretical model we argue that moral emotions can be systematically triggered in an organizational context such that behaviors may become associated with emotions indicating to the person experiencing them that he or she has done something wrong (guilt, shame, and embarrassment), that someone else has done something wrong (anger and contempt), or that he or she has done something right (pride).

Organizations offer such opportunities for moral learning because they vary on moral dimensions (Schminke et al. 2005, Victor and Cullen 1988), and their norms may or may not align with society values (Palmer 2012, Warren 2003). Furthermore, many employees encounter new or novel ethical dilemmas within organizations that are not regularly experienced in their non-work lives (e.g., hiring, firing, and formal negotiations). In these cases, they may lack prior opportunities to consider relevant societal values or build repertoires for solving such problems (see Margolis and Molinsky 2008). As such, moral ambiguity is likely to arise, referring broadly to individuals being morally aware, but being confused about what is right and wrong (Waters and Bird 1987). For instance, Warren and Smith-Crowe (2008) argued that while individuals’ commitment to moral rules is fairly stable, they must figure out whether and how moral rules apply to different situations (see also Margolis and Phillips 1999). As Sykes and Matza (1957, p. 666) put it, we do not live by categorical imperatives, “rather, values or norms appear as qualified guides for action, limited in their applicability in terms of time, place, persons, and social circumstances.”

In previous research, moral ambiguity has been conceptualized as stemming from conflicting moral roles or obligations, differing normative prescriptions, unclear situational cues, novel situations, and individual differences (De Cremer et al. 2008, Newton 1986, Peter and Liaschenko 2004, Sonenshein 2007, 2009, Warren and Smith-Crowe 2008, Waters and Bird 1987, Wojciszke 1994, Wiltermuth and Flynn 2013). For example, one of Waters and Bird’s (1987) interviewees explained, “An outside recruiter approached me looking for a person to fill a position and it would be a potentially great assignment for one of my people. But I don’t want to lose her. What do I do?” (p. 17). The moral ambiguity arises because the manager’s obligation to his organization conflicts with his obligation to his employee. Another interviewee struggled with the morality of reporting unethical behavior: “I got sexually harassed. Do I report this guy to my boss? What is ethics [sic] here?” (p. 17). For this individual the morality of reporting this abuse is ambiguous even if for others it may seem straightforward. As these examples imply, we may experience moral ambiguity prior to making a decision or acting. Ambiguity also

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1 We define moral awareness consistently with Rest (1986, p. 7): moral awareness entails making “…some sort of interpretation of the particular situation in terms of what actions were possible, who (including oneself) would be affected by each course of action, and how the interested parties would regard such effects on their welfare.” Similarly, Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008) argued that awareness entails taking ethical considerations into account.
may arise when one is unexpectedly confronted with the feedback that one has misbehaved.

That researchers have found organizations’ ethical standards to influence the ethicality of individuals’ behavior (Kish-Gephart et al. 2010, Pierce and Snyder 2008) suggests that such standards are communicated to organizational members and to some extent heeded by them. Further, Bird and Waters (1987) found that managers commonly recognized their moral obligation to their organization as a priority: “The standard of organizational responsibility calls for managers to assign preeminent priority to furthering the objectives and economic viability of their organizations especially in the face of other considerations that would assign lower prominence to these goals” (p. 9). Organizational responsibility relates to broader moral standards, such as Haidt’s (2007) notion of loyalty. This is to say that organizational members may feel that they have moral obligations to their organizations on the basis of responsibility or loyalty and may align themselves with their organizations’ ethical norms accordingly.

We consider the important role played by organizational spokespersons, or those seen to be communicating on behalf of the organization, in conveying ethical norms through reprimanding individuals for allegedly failing in their moral obligations to the organization. For the purposes of our theorizing, moral ambiguity is considered influential to the recruitment into collective corruption regardless of whether the individual feels moral ambiguity just prior to or after the reprimand. The mere experience of moral ambiguity post-reprimand influences the individual’s moral reasoning. Both moral ambiguity and a sense of moral obligation to the organization will increase the likelihood that individuals will heed the negative sanction of the spokesperson. Although spokespersons are likely to elicit moral emotions, we do not assume they do so purposefully. To the extent that organizations’ ethical norms are misaligned with those of society, we argue that spokespersons will promote the spread of corruption.

**Emotion-Evoked Collective Corruption Process**

Here, drawing on the research we discuss at length above, we lay out our theoretical model (see Figure 1), consisting of direct and vicarious pathways to collective corruption. Prior to delving into our model, however, we note the boundary conditions of our theorizing. First, we assume that corruption already exists in the organization. Second, our model begins with an inciting event, which we call a violation-sanctioning event: an individual commits a violation and is rebuked for it by an organizational spokesperson. We assume that the “transgression” is an action that is considered appropriate outside of the organization, but is considered inappropriate inside the organization because it runs counter to the organization’s corrupt practices. Third, individuals (both targets and non-targets of spokespersons’ sanctions) in our model are well-intentioned and experience moral ambiguity which is present at the time of post-sanction moral reasoning. With these boundary conditions in place, we argue below that through emotional processes such violation-sanctioning events can engender the spread of corruption to the target of the sanction and beyond to non-targeted individuals. We conclude the paper by considering the implications for our theorizing if we relax some of these boundary conditions.
**Direct process.** First, we theorize a direct process. The target individual is likely to react to the morally-charged rebuke entailed in the violation-sanctioning event with a negatively valenced moral emotion that is either self-directed (embarrassment, guilt, or shame) or other-directed (anger or contempt). The former suggests to the target individual that he or she did in fact do something wrong; the latter suggests to the target individual that he or she did not do anything wrong, rather it is the spokesperson who is in the wrong. Importantly, these reactions (self-directed versus other-directed emotions) are likely under different conditions, and they have different implications for the spread of corruption. In addition to the work previously referenced, we rely on Goffman’s (1959) theory of social interaction as a basis for understanding the pressure targets may feel to align themselves with the organization, yet we also propose a lack of organizational identification (Ashforth and Mael 1989) as an antidote to this pressure.

In Goffman’s (1959) analysis of social interactions, he described the necessity of individuals cooperating with each other in order to enact a social situation of a determinant type. He gives an example of this necessity from his study of a hospital, in which a medical intern is subjected to a daily ritual meant to display the intern’s ignorance. In particular, the intern was made to comment without advanced preparation on patients’ charts, and his answers were compared to staff doctors’ own chart assessments, which were based on advanced preparation. Goffman’s point is that despite the apparent disadvantage to the intern, he participates.

Several conclusions from Goffman’s (1959) theory help to explain why the intern would participate. First, individuals often feel a sense of obligation to interact with others in a way that upholds others’ presentation of themselves. The intern likely feels an obligation to interact with the staff doctors as if they are more knowledgeable than him. Second, groups of individuals interacting are dependent upon each other to cooperate and each individual ought to look to the group to know how the situation is defined, and the group ought to tell the individual what is expected of him or her. Interestingly, the bond of the group is not necessarily a warm one, rather it may be a “…formal relationship that is automatically extended and received as soon as the individual takes a place on the team,” that is, joins the group (p. 83). Here the intern joined the group when he accepted his internship; the expectations of the situation defined by the staff doctors are made clear to the intern, and he meets these expectations. Furthermore, in an organizational context there can be the additional pressure of a sense of moral obligation individuals have to their organizations (e.g., to pursue the organizations’ interests and be loyal).

Yet, as is true of the situation of interest in our paper, not everyone cooperates in these interactions despite the pressure toward doing so. In reference to instances of noncooperation, Goffman (1959, p. 97) remarks on the importance of the “director”: “…the director may be given the special duty of bringing back into line any member of the team whose performance becomes unsuitable.” Goffman indicates that directors primarily employ sanctioning to do so. In our case, the organizational spokesperson plays the role of director. When targets are sanctioned by an organizational spokesperson, Goffman’s analysis suggests that the target will experience pressure to heed the sanction on two fronts. First, the mere fact that the target is sanctioned indicates to the target that he or she has committed a transgression in straying from the defined social situation.
Further, the content of the sanction, entailing an accusation that the target has harmed or potentially harmed the organization, explicitly indicates that the target has morally transgressed. Second, the fact that the spokesperson presents himself or herself as a spokesperson means that the target may feel some level of obligation to treat the spokesperson as such.

Similarly, Milgram (1969, p. 150) argued that it is exactly this difficulty that led his participants to agree to inflict harm on another person:

Since to refuse to obey the experimenter is to reject his claim to competence and authority in this situation, a severe social impropriety is necessarily involved. The experimental situation is so constructed that there is no way the subject can stop shocking the learner without violating the experimenter’s self-definition. Thus, the subject fears that if he breaks off, he will appear arrogant, untoward, and rude. Such emotions, although they appear small in scope alongside the violence being done to the learner, nonetheless help bind the subject into obedience.

In the situation we describe, it would be awkward for targets to deny the sanction because to do so would be to deny the self-definition of the spokesperson, or at least the behaviors advocated by the spokesperson. Thus, it is these pressures that would lead targets to essentially internalize the spokesperson’s sanction, meaning that targets would experience negative, self-directed emotions: guilt, shame, or embarrassment.

However, there is an important, but implicit assumption in the argument thus far: that targets care about their participation in the situation. Some individuals care more and are likely to respond to the violation-sanctioning event as we have described, but some care less and they are likely to respond to the same event differently. We contend that when individuals’ identities are based in part on their membership in their organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989, Bartel et al. 2012), they will be more motivated to participate in and sustain the defined social situations of their organizations – and feel a sense of moral obligation to the organization – than those whose identities are not wrapped up in their organizational membership (Warren and Smith-Crowe 2008). They will be more motivated to internalize sanctions as these are messages containing information important to their goal of sustaining situations and fulfilling their moral obligations. Thus, they will be more likely to experience self-directed moral emotions (e.g., see Eller et al. 2011 who found that embarrassment is more likely to occur in front of ingroup rather than outgroup members). Consistent with our rationale, higher organizational identification corresponds to increased cooperation (Bartel 2001, Dukerich et al. 2002).

At the same time, those lower in organizational identification will care less about cooperating and will not feel the same sense of moral obligation. Their organizational membership does not factor significantly into their self-conception, and therefore, they are not as motivated to accept criticism that would allow them to align themselves more closely to the organization. Rather, they are likely to feel angry at or contemptuous

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2 There is some evidence that those high in organizational identification may be the people who blow the whistle rather than cooperate (Vadera 2010); this is consistent with some popular accounts of whistle-blowing (Woodford 2012). Yet, we think that under circumstances of moral ambiguity a connection between organizational identification and whistle blowing is less likely. Employees who want to save the organization because they care must first recognize that the organization needs saving.
toward the spokesperson who questions their morality and thus questions their right to behave as they see fit and their ability to make competent moral choices. Questioning their morality in this way may also signal the incompetence of the spokesperson. Along these lines, Lemay et al. (2012) found that victims committed to a relationship with someone who had harmed them felt hurt in response to being harmed, but those not committed felt angry. Regarding contempt, Fischer and Roseman (2007) concluded that it reflects the motivation of those who experience it to distance themselves from those who caused it. Notably, different than other treatments of the influence of organizational identification, we emphasize the link between identification and the experience of specific emotions that directly affect and are entailed in moral reasoning. In the context we describe, high organizational identification is likely to be associated with negative, self-directed moral emotions, while low organizational identification is likely to be associated with negative, other-directed moral emotions.

To illustrate, imagine that a well-intentioned financial manager decides to release some financial information regarding earnings projections to a Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) regulator. Imagine further that the financial manager is subsequently reprimanded by a vice president (an organizational spokesperson) for giving the SEC regulator too much information about the corporation’s future earnings. The vice president’s contention is that the financial manager has harmed the corporation and put the shareholders at risk by conveying such information, and that she has therefore acted unethically. Given the ambiguity surrounding the release of financial information, there is opportunity for the vice president to influence the financial manager’s sense of right and wrong, even though we assume in this case that the release of information was appropriate and that the pressure from the vice president against sharing information with the SEC is part of the existing corruption in the corporation. Importantly, the financial manager’s susceptibility to influence is likely to be greater to the extent that she more strongly identifies with the firm, in which case she is likely to be motivated to align herself with the organization, both in terms of heeding the messages of spokespersons and aligning herself with the practices of the organization. Thus, when reprimanded, her likely reaction will be guilt, shame, or embarrassment. On the contrary, to the extent that the financial manager does not base her self-conception on her membership in the organization, she will be more likely to experience anger or contempt, suggesting that it is the vice president who is in the wrong. Based on the above rationale, we propose the following:

*Proposition 1a:* To the extent that target individuals identify with the organization, a sanction from an organizational spokesperson for violating a corrupt organizational practice is likely to prompt self-directed, negative moral emotions in the individuals (guilt, shame, or embarrassment).

3 While U.S. public corporations are required to provide formal reporting to the SEC on a regular basis, whether they are required to release soft information regarding subjective assessments and projections is often debated (Hiler 1987). This means too that soft information could be released by an individual manager without passing through upper management for approval. Financial information is extremely valuable in the marketplace and the release of any information not equally accessible by all shareholders creates disadvantages and occasions for opportunism, as well as inaccurate portrayals of firm health. Therefore, the release of accurate and equally-accessible financial information is critical for investors and the integrity of the marketplace.
Proposition 1b: To the extent that target individuals do not identify with the organization, a sanction from an organizational spokesperson for violating a corrupt organizational practice is likely to prompt other-directed, negative moral emotions in the individuals (anger or contempt).

Recalling our discussion of the functions of moral emotions, the emotions triggered by the sanctions of spokespersons are likely to influence target individuals’ moral reasoning, judgment, affective residue, and behavior. First, the experience of a moral emotion is likely to affect moral reasoning by triggering a reflection process in which the target considers why he or she is experiencing this emotion. When the emotion is self-directed (guilt, shame, or embarrassment), the target is likely to reflect on the wrong he or she may have done. Because the “transgression” was unintentional, the wrong done is probably not immediately obvious to the target, but is something that the target may come to “understand” through reflection. When the emotion is other-directed (anger or contempt), the target is likely to reflect on the wrong the spokesperson did in accusing him or her of transgressing. In the case of the financial manager, self-directed emotions would likely trigger reflection on why her actions were bad for her organization, but other-directed emotions would likely trigger reflection on how the spokesperson has insulted her with his accusation.

Second, the outcomes of this reflection process are likely to reflect the orientation of the emotion (cf. appraisal tendency theory, Keltner and Lerner 2010). Targets who experience negative, self-directed emotions are likely to come to think of their actions as wrong (meaning that their moral judgment has shifted), and the actions in question are likely to become associated with corresponding affective residue. For instance, if the financial manager experiences guilt when reprimanded by the vice president, she may come to think of sharing earnings projections with the SEC as wrong and something to avoid. The corresponding affective residue means that she will have a flash of guilt if she considers sharing earnings projections with the SEC in the future. In contrast, targets who experience other-directed emotions are not likely to come to think of their actions as wrong (meaning that their moral judgment has not shifted), and the actions in question are not likely to become associated with the affective residue of wrong actions. If the financial manager is angered by the vice president’s rebuke, for instance, then she is not likely to come to think of sharing earnings projections with the SEC as wrong, or to have any affective residue consistent with this judgment.

Third, to the extent that targets’ judgment and affective residue become aligned with the corrupt practices of the organization (as in the case of targets who experience self-directed emotions), targets are more likely to participate in collective corruption in the future. Conversely, to the extent that the judgment and affective residue of the targets who react to spokespersons’ sanctions with anger and contempt do not become aligned with the organization’s corrupt practices, future participation of targets in corrupt activities becomes less likely. In the example where the financial manager comes to think of her actions as wrong, her affective residue will reinforce this moral judgment and behavior. In contrast, in the example where she reflects on the wrong the spokesperson has done, she will not experience affective residue that would promote her participation in corruption.
Supportive of the process described, experimental studies on transgressions and negative, self-directed moral emotions (guilt, shame, and embarrassment) have found that an increased willingness to comply occurs after the experience of these emotions (Apsler 1975, Carlsmith and Gross 1969, Carlson and Miller 1987, Freedman et al. 1967). Brock and Becker (1966) found that undergraduate participants, who were induced to transgress (i.e., who ostensibly damaged the experimenter’s equipment and thus jeopardized his chances of completing his master’s thesis) were far more likely to subsequently sign a petition supporting doubling their tuition than those participants who had not transgressed. In fact, none of the participants in the no-transgression condition signed the petition. Theorists have asserted that individuals comply with the hope of alleviating their negative emotional states (Van Kleef et al. 2006). In support of this explanation, Baumeister and colleagues (1994) explained that guilt mediates the relationship between transgressions and helping behavior because guilt is a community-driven emotion. “Helping is an act of communion, and guilt is based on a threat to communion; thus, helping is a subjective means of overcoming this threat. Helping can restore equity, repair possible damage to the relationship, and, in general, promote social attachment” (Baumeister et al. 1994, p. 249). We expect other self-directed, negative moral emotions to operate in a similar fashion. For instance, there is evidence that individuals will comply with requests after experiencing embarrassment because they want to restore their social self-esteem and maintain their affiliations (Apsler 1975).

Further, research has found that anticipated emotions can prevent future transgressions. Grasmick and colleagues (1993) examined the effects of shame and embarrassment associated with drunk driving offenses and self-reported measures of drunk driving before and after a 10-year period when public service announcements, legal sanctions, and television programming against drunk driving rose dramatically. They found that after a period of heightened communication and sanctions, individuals were more likely to associate shame with drunk driving and less likely to engage in the behavior. Grasmick and colleagues (1991) similarly found a decrease in littering after an anti-littering campaign was implemented even though the campaign did not coincide with an increase in legal sanctions. Instead, they attributed the program’s success to linking shame and embarrassment to the act of littering. In a field experiment, Panagopoulus (2010) found that anticipated pride (voters’ names would be published in the local newspaper) and shame (nonvoters’ names would be published in the local newspaper) motivated eligible voters to vote in elections. Similarly, Tangney (1994) found that participants who anticipated feeling guilty reported they would not steal something they needed even if they knew they would not be caught. Cohen and colleagues (2011, 2013) found that those who are more prone to feel guilty – and thus anticipate guilt – are less likely to engage in counterproductive and unethical work behaviors. Cohen et al. (2011) also found that MBA students higher in guilt proneness were judged by their counterparts in a negotiation exercise as more honest.

Thus, in this way affective residue can serve as a form of internal punishment that will perpetuate independently of external punishment. In an organizational context, by promoting the attachment of negative, self-directed moral emotions to specific behaviors, organizational spokespersons have the ability to create a self-reinforcing system of internal sanctioning that does not require continued detection and external punishment.
Likewise, pride can serve as an internalized positive reinforcement.

However, negative, other-directed moral emotions result in different outcomes. Anger prompts a desire to change what is wrong with the perpetrator (Fischer and Roseman 2007) – in this case, the organizational spokesperson. Such change is often sought via “…short-term attacks (mostly verbal aggression)...” (Fischer and Roseman 2007, p. 112), and although the anger does not make the individual insensitive to reconciliation attempts on the part of the perpetrator (Hutcherson and Gross 2011), such attempts are less likely than perpetrators responding destructively (Lemay et al. 2012). For instance, across several studies employing recall tasks, Lemay et al. found that anger responses were associated with victims’ having a goal of changing the perpetrator’s behavior (e.g., “I wanted this person to do things my way”, p. 9) and of aggressing toward the perpetrator (e.g., “I yelled at him/her”, p. 9). Perpetrators typically responded to this anger-based aggression with further destructive behavior (e.g., “I criticized him/her”, p. 9).

In contrast to anger, but similarly unhelpful to the spread of corruption, contempt prompts a desire to disassociate (Fischer and Roseman 2007) – in this case, a desire to disassociate from the organizational spokesperson. Contempt is considered to be more damning to relationships than anger because while anger can be mitigated by reconciliation attempts on the part of the perpetrator, contempt is unlikely to be diminished by the same (Fischer and Roseman 2007). Indeed, contempt is associated with social distance, indicating that the contemptuous person is superior (Melwani et al. 2012). Thus, an individual who responds to an organizational spokesperson’s sanction with anger or contempt is likely to focus on what is wrong with the spokesperson and less likely to focus on the message contained in the spokesperson’s sanction.

Based on the above rationale, we propose the following:

*Proposition 2a:* Target individuals who experience self-directed, negative moral emotions (guilt, shame, or embarrassment) are likely to engage in reflection and moral reasoning such that their moral judgment is more likely to shift toward, and their affective residue is more likely to align with, corrupt practices.

*Proposition 2b:* Target individuals who experience other-directed, negative moral emotions (anger or contempt) are likely to engage in reflection and moral reasoning such that their moral judgment is less likely to shift toward, and their affective residue is less likely to align with, corrupt practices.

*Proposition 3a:* To the extent that their moral judgment and affective residue align with corrupt organizational practices, target individuals are more likely to participate in collective corruption in the future.

*Proposition 3b:* To the extent that their moral judgment and affective residue do not align with corrupt organizational practices, target individuals are less likely to participate in collective corruption in the future, thus triggering a violation-sanctioning event.

Importantly, we assume that the pressure targets experience to align themselves with the corrupt practices of the organization is not necessarily an isolated event, but something
that may happen repeatedly, particularly when targets resist compliance. We discuss this possibility below, but here we note that the process we have theorized thus far may have an incremental rather than a definitive influence.

**Vicarious process.** We theorize also that corruption can spread via a vicarious process (Bandura 1977, Kelly and Barsade 2001). This entails organizational members learning about right and wrong by witnessing the transgressions of others, or hearing about such incidents (e.g., in the context of informal training or storytelling), as well as target individuals’ responses to these transgressions. We refer to those who vicariously experience violation-sanctioning events as non-target individuals. While Bandura’s (1977) vicarious process focuses on developing expectancies regarding reinforcements by observing the behaviors and consequences of others, our approach centers on developing expectancies regarding emotions by observing and sharing in the feelings experienced by others (cf. Niedenthal and Brauer 2012, p. 269). For instance, observers can come to expect that if they engage in certain behaviors, they are likely to feel guilty. In the context of our model, the vicarious process of spreading corruption necessitates that non-target individuals understand that their affective response is a reaction to the target individual’s experience so that they can understand what behaviors are associated with their emotions. Such social learning can take place through an emotional contagion process whereby non-target individuals “catch” the emotions of others thereby coming to experience the same emotions (e.g., Barsade 2002, Kelly and Barsade 2001, Pugh 2001).

Emotional contagion can occur through conscious or subconscious processes (Barsade 2002, Hawk et al. 2011, Shamay-Tsoory 2011, Shamay-Tsoory et al. 2009). The conscious process entails perspective-taking; non-target individuals assess situations and imagine how the people in those situations feel, thereby stimulating a similar emotional response in themselves (Barsade 2002, see also Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, Ashforth and Saks 2002). Moreover, non-target individuals may understand this affective information as being indicative of how one should feel in such a situation (Barsade 2002, de Sousa 1987, Niedenthal and Brauer 2012). The subconscious process entails rapid, involuntary mimicry (Barsade 2002, Barsade et al. 2009, Hatfield et al. 1993), particularly facial mimicry, which then causes non-target individuals to experience the emotions of those they are mimicking; this process takes place via the mirror neuron system (Barsade et al. 2009, Shamay-Tsoory 2011; see Niedenthal and Brauer 2012 for a review). In their research on empathy, Shamay-Tsoory and colleagues (Shamay-Tsoory 2011, Shamay-Tsoory et al. 2009) have argued that while these two processes (conscious and subconscious) are associated with separate neural structures, both may become activated by a given stimulus.

Demonstrating the contagious nature of emotions, Miller (1987) found that observers of embarrassing incidents experienced empathetic embarrassment. As Miller (1987, p. 1068) explained, “the maintenance of proper conduct in social interaction seems to be such a central concern and such a precarious undertaking that envisioning ourselves in the place of embarrassed others – even if we are innocent bystanders – may cause us to suffer empathic embarrassment.” Similarly, Barsade (2002) found that in a laboratory task, participants came to experience the emotion first displayed by a confederate. In an ethnographic study of an orchestra, Maitlis and Ozcelik (2004) observed emotional
contagion via perspective-taking as individuals coped with their colleagues being fired. These findings align with the results of Gump and Kulik’s (1997) laboratory experiment, which suggests that threatening events (e.g., negative sanctions) may facilitate emotional contagion more so than nonthreatening events.

To illustrate the importance of emotional contagion in our theoretical model, we return to our example and consider that a colleague from the organization (a non-target individual) may have watched the financial manager being reprimanded by a vice president for sharing too much information with the SEC. This colleague likely also observed the financial manager showing outward signs of either self-directed (shame, embarrassment, or guilt) or other-directed (anger or contempt) emotions. Imagining himself in the financial manager’s shoes, the colleague might come to feel the same emotion he sees the financial manager feeling in reaction to the reprimand. Importantly, by taking the perspective of the financial manager and empathizing with her, the colleague can come to understand that sharing earnings projections with the SEC is wrong (in the case of self-directed emotions) or is not wrong (in the case of other-directed emotions). Based on the above discussion, we propose the following:

*Proposition 4a:* Vicarious exposure to target individuals’ self-directed, negative moral emotions (guilt, shame, or embarrassment) prompted by a negative sanction from an organizational spokesperson will elicit the same emotions in non-target individuals.

*Proposition 4b:* Vicarious exposure to target individuals’ other-directed, negative moral emotions (anger or contempt) prompted by a negative sanction from an organizational spokesperson will elicit the same emotions in non-target individuals.

Importantly, the emotional displays of the target individual provide critical information for framing the situation. De Cremer and colleagues (2008) found in their laboratory study that observers’ perceptions of an authority’s fairness depend upon the target individual’s moral emotions, suggesting that others’ moral emotions serve as important sense-making cues. It is important to note that De Cremer and colleagues’ (2008) findings were only supported for situations of ambiguity, which corresponds with our theoretical lens and the theoretical foundation of other collective corruption theorists (Ashforth and Anand 2003, Palmer 2008). In particular, Palmer (2008) noted that employees, in times of uncertainty, look to others when they are defining the situation and determining the appropriate way to act or think. In short, emotional contagion is not only effective for spreading emotional responses, but it also serves as a means to providing information for framing a social situation, whereby certain moral emotions are associated with certain situations.

In this case, when behaviors are associated with guilt, shame, or embarrassment in target individuals, non-target individuals can learn that certain behaviors are considered unethical and can develop corresponding affective residue (Baumeister et al. 2007, Damasio 1994), which will act as an internal sanction. Along with the judgment that the behavior is wrong, this affective residue will likely inhibit non-target individuals from engaging in the behavior in the future. Conversely, non-target individuals who see or hear about target individuals reacting with anger at or contempt for organizational spokespersons are not likely to come to see the behavior in question as wrong, or to
acquire affective residue aligned with corrupt organizational practices. For these reasons, non-target individuals who catch anger or contempt are not likely to engage in collective corruption in the future. Hence,

**Proposition 5a:** Non-target individuals who vicariously experience self-directed, negative moral emotions (guilt, shame, or embarrassment) are likely to engage in reflection and moral reasoning such that their moral judgment is more likely to shift toward, and their affective residue is more likely to align with, corrupt practices.

**Proposition 5b:** Non-target individuals who vicariously experience other-directed, negative moral emotions (anger or contempt) are likely to engage in reflection and moral reasoning such that their moral judgment is less likely to shift toward, and their affective residue is less likely to align with, corrupt practices.

**Proposition 6a:** To the extent that non-target individuals’ moral judgment and affective residue align with corrupt organizational practices, they are more likely to participate in collective corruption in the future.

**Proposition 6b:** To the extent that non-target individuals’ moral judgment and affective residue do not align with corrupt organizational practices, they are less likely to participate in collective corruption in the future, thus triggering a violation-sanctioning event.

As we stipulated with the direct process, here too we do not assume that the vicarious process necessarily will have a definitive impact on moral reasoning and its outcomes; we elaborate below.

Importantly, the vicarious pathway is efficient. While the direct pathway suggests that organizational spokespersons who recruit others to participate in corrupt practices must work at the slow pace of inducting one person at a time, the vicarious pathway suggests the possibility of influencing multiple persons at a time. Corruption in organizations would most certainly be stymied if the only means for spreading corruption were direct. Rather, through vicarious means the spread of corruption resembles, as Ashforth and colleagues (2008) put it, the spread of a virus-like infection. Organizational members, relatively en masse, may be ensnared by the emotion-evoked collective corruption process merely by witnessing or hearing about an event that evokes moral emotions. In fact, the virulence of emotional contagion may be increased to the extent that multiple people are vicariously exposed at once (Hatfield and Rapson 2004). That is, it stands to reason that once emotion begins to spread from one person to another, it becomes more difficult for each subsequent person to be unaffected by these emotion cues.

**Feedback loop.** Thus far we have argued that a violation-sanctioning event will prompt self-directed or other-directed moral emotions, which will ultimately promote the spread of collective corruption or not. If the process we detailed above does result in individuals participating in corrupt practices in the future, a feedback loop can be triggered by praise from an organizational spokesperson. Having learned via transgression what behavior is organizationally desirable and “moral,” an organizational
member is likely to experience pride when praised for engaging in that desirable behavior in the future. Based on our previous argument, we would expect those higher in organizational identification to be more likely to respond to praise with pride because they care to align themselves with the organization; those low in organizational identification may not respond to praise emotionally.

For instance, subsequent to her participation in corrupt practices, the financial manager may experience a sense of pride associated with praise for behaving in line with the organization by not divulging earnings projections to the SEC (e.g., “good job handling the SEC – you handled them like a pro”). Pride, in turn, prompts moral reasoning, as she reflects upon what she has to feel proud about (i.e., protecting the shareholders and organization by withholding information). This reflection will serve to reinforce the previously learned lesson about right and wrong, and the positive affective residue likely to now be associated with the corrupt behavior will make future compliance more likely. Similar effects may be seen in non-targets via the vicarious process.

It is worth noting, however, that in some organizations, individuals may not be praised explicitly for engaging in corrupt actions; rather in these organizations, corruption would be spread only via negative sanctions and negatively valenced, self-directed emotions. Further, the emotion-evoked corruption process may not result in alignment between the individual and the organization. If individuals do not engage in collective corruption in the future, a direct, negative sanction from an organizational spokesperson will restart the process; that is, a violation-sanctioning event will trigger the experience of a negative moral emotion, which will influence moral reasoning, moral judgment, affective residue, and future behavior. That the process can restart itself with each new “transgression” is important because while we do not assume that one negative sanction from an organizational spokesperson will have definitive influence over the individuals’ moral reasoning, judgment, and so forth, we do assume that with repeated exposure to this process individuals become more and more likely to eventually become aligned with the organization.

Based on the above rationale, we propose the following:

Proposition 7a: Future participation in collective corruption resulting in positive reinforcement from an organizational spokesperson will prompt a self-directed, positive moral emotion (pride).

Proposition 7b: The relationship described in Proposition 7a will be moderated by organizational identification such that the relationship will be stronger for those higher in organizational identification compared to those lower in organizational identification.

Proposition 7c: Future nonparticipation in collective corruption resulting in a negative sanction from an organizational spokesperson is likely to reactivate the emotion-evoked process such that target individuals higher in organizational identification are likely to react with self-directed, negative emotions (guilt, shame, or embarrassment), while target individuals lower in organizational identification are likely to react with other-directed, negative emotions (anger or contempt).
Proposition 8a: Target individuals who experience a self-directed, positive moral emotion (pride) in relation to participating in corrupt practices are likely to engage in reflection and moral reasoning such that their moral judgment is more likely to shift toward, and their affective residue is more likely to align with, corrupt practices.

Proposition 8b: Vicarious exposure to target individuals’ self-directed, positive moral emotions (pride) prompted by positive reinforcement from an organizational spokesperson will elicit the same emotion in non-target individuals.

Proposition 8c: Non-target individuals who vicariously experience a self-directed, positive moral emotion (pride) in relation to participating in corrupt practices are likely to engage in reflection and moral reasoning such that their moral judgment is more likely to shift toward and their affective residue is more likely to align with corrupt practices.

Discussion

In this paper we present theory on the role of moral emotions in the spread of collective corruption: the emotion-evoked collective corruption model. In organizations in which corruption already exists, individuals may be rebuked by other organizational members (spokespersons), who seem to speak on behalf of the organization, for “transgressions” – actions seen as wrong in the organization because they impede corrupt practices, but are considered right outside the organization. We argue that individuals’ emotional responses to these violation-sanctioning events affect their moral reasoning and future likelihood of participating in corruption. Those who internalize the sanction (experience guilt, shame, or embarrassment) are likely to conclude that they have in fact done wrong and they will be likely to participate in corrupt practices in the future due to both their resulting moral judgment and the associated affective residue. Praise for future compliance resulting in pride serves as further reinforcement. Those who reject the sanction (experience anger or contempt) are likely to conclude that they have not done anything wrong. These individuals are unlikely to participate in corrupt practices in the future due to their resulting moral judgment and the associated affective residue. We further theorize that through emotional contagion processes, bystanders may be vicariously drawn into corruption, depending on whether they experience self-directed or other-directed emotions. It is emotional contagion that helps explain the efficient spread of corruption.

Our theory complements existing process models because we consider how corruption might spread to a population not well-represented in existing theory: the well-intentioned and morally engaged. Whereas previous theory captures quite well the dark paths toward corruption trampled by the ill-intentioned and the thoughtless, there seems to be an implicit assumption that the well-intentioned and thoughtful are immune to becoming entangled in corruption. Yet, a consideration of the role of moral emotions in the process of moral reasoning suggests that even those who are trying to do good can become confused. That is, the functional role played by emotions in reasoning (the idea of emotion as information, de Sousa 1987) is undermined by inappropriate emotions that convey a false impression of reality (like feeling ashamed of doing a good deed). Of course, such confusion is not inevitable as our theorizing about anger and contempt
suggests. More broadly, a consideration of the emotional lives of individuals in organizations is a promising avenue toward understanding and predicting behavior in organizations, which is embedded and unfolds in the context of relationships.

**Relaxing the Boundary Conditions**

Here we expand on our theorizing by considering the implications of relaxing some of the boundary conditions beginning with moral ambiguity. If individuals in the situation we described experience moral certainty rather than ambiguity, we speculate that the results of the violation-sanctioning event could be represented essentially by a hybrid of our theorizing and existing theory. Likely individuals sanctioned for doing wrong when they are certain they have not done anything wrong will respond with anger at or contempt for the spokesperson. What ensues from there could be what we have described previously, where the individual ultimately does not engage in corruption and her reaction may inoculate others against corrupt practices via emotional contagion. Alternatively, after the anger or contempt recedes, these individuals may consider the instrumental reasons for joining in corruption; that is, though they know it is wrong and want to do the right thing, they may be tempted by the promise of rewards. The result could be something like “willful blindness” (Heffernan 2011), a reference to the legal notion that we are responsible for things that we should and could have known, but chose not to see. In psychological terms, these individuals may morally disengage (Bandura et al. 1996) and follow the mindless path toward corruption articulated by existing theory (Ashforth and Anand 2003, Brief et al. 2001, Moore 2009, Palmer 2008). We further speculate that while corruption could spread to others in this case via social learning (Bandura 1977), without the motivational force of emotion behind it, the spread of corruption is likely to be less efficient. Interestingly, it may be the condition of moral certainty that allows for an understanding of when our theorizing and existing theory might essentially both hold.

We also consider the implications of relaxing the violation-sanctioning event condition. In order for moral emotions to play a role in whether or not collective corruption spreads, they must be evoked. This is the purpose the violation-sanctioning event serves in our theorizing. Yet, other triggers are conceivable. Due to moral ambiguity, a well-intentioned individual may haplessly stumble into engaging in corrupt practices, perhaps just modeling what he has seen others do. Subsequent praise from an organizational spokesperson for engaging in corruption can lead to a sense of pride, which will reinforce the behavior. Individuals may overhear others talking about them and their “transgressions,” arousing negative self-directed (guilt, shame, or embarrassment) or other-directed (anger or contempt) emotions, which could motivate them to participate in corruption or not, respectively. Even gossip or stories about others could arouse these negative emotions when the protagonists are disparaged for “transgressions” that listeners have themselves committed. Importantly, though, to the extent that moral emotions are elicited privately (e.g., in the example of overhearing others talking) or their expression is carefully regulated (e.g., when individuals mask their emotions), corruption is unlikely to spread via emotional contagion.
Future Research Directions

As discussed above, we assume that the spread of corruption would be thwarted at least to some extent by disambiguation. As such, an important avenue for future research would be investigating the factors that strengthen and weaken moral ambiguity. We expect, for instance, that the nature of the work itself could influence moral ambiguity. Some work is highly specialized or entails tasks that do not easily relate to the experiences of employees’ personal lives (for examples see Margolis and Molinsky 2008). Under such circumstances, moral ambiguity would be more likely because individuals would have difficulty generalizing ethical judgments from their personal lives to their work lives. Another factor may be the content of ethics training programs, particularly those that fail to go beyond platitudes to communicate in practical terms what individuals should do in different situations. As Donaldson (1996, p. 6) explained, “The pronouncement that bribery is unacceptable is useless unless accompanied by guidelines for gift giving, payments to get goods through customs, and ‘requests’ from intermediaries who are hired to ask for bribes.” Additionally, there may be relevant individual differences. For instance, Wiltermuth and Flynn (2013) recently demonstrated that to the extent that individuals possess a sense of power, they experience greater moral clarity. Similarly, those with strong moral convictions would be likely to experience moral certainty (at least in the domain of their convictions) as they are intolerant of and prefer to distance themselves from those who disagree with them (Skitka et al. 2005). Further, recent research suggests those with strong moral convictions are more distrustful of authority (Wisneski et al. 2009) and thus presumably less susceptible to influence from an organizational authority figure.

Another potentially fruitful avenue for future research is a consideration of the role of mixed emotions in the spread of corruption. We have treated emotions as singular states, but emotions can occur in succession (e.g., shame can lead to anger, Lewis 1992; anger can lead to contempt, Fischer and Roseman 2007) or simultaneously (e.g., happiness and sadness, Larsen and McGraw 2011; amusement and disgust, McGraw and Warren 2010). Building on the current paper, while we know there are connections among shame, anger, and contempt, there is little research into other possible combinations among the emotions considered herein. The first step would be to identify likely emotion combinations. The second step would be to investigate the effects of these combinations. An interesting research direction would be to examine how combinations of emotions that entail both self and other-directed emotions may or may not facilitate the spread of corruption. We have argued that guilt, shame, embarrassment, and pride (all self-directed emotions) will facilitate corruption, while anger and contempt (other-directed emotions) will hinder it. If an individual experiences shame and anger, would the two cancel each other out? Would the influence of one emotion dominate the other? Further, are mixed emotions contagious, or are observers likely to catch only one of the emotions? Suggesting the possibility of the former, Rothman (2011) found that observers can recognize accurately mixed emotions in others. Future research should address these questions of contagion as well.
Practical Implications

There are several practical implications of our theorizing. First and most broadly, our theorizing suggests that it is not enough to motivate organizational members to be moral or to hire employees who are morally motivated because it is not only the thoughtless and the ill-intentioned who may act unethically. Those who are well-intentioned may be led astray by negative feedback for “getting out of line.” Yet, these same events and processes can also effectively promote ethical outcomes given that appropriate messages are communicated. The implication is that organizations must carefully monitor what is being communicated to ensure that these messages are indeed appropriate. Because formal communications are likely to be visible to those both inside and outside the organization and are thus unlikely to deviate from societal conceptualizations of right and wrong, it is informal communications that organizations must especially monitor – “Informal, ‘hallway’ conversations about ethics, informal training sessions in which organization members are ‘shown the ropes,’ and verbal and nonverbal behaviors…” (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003, p. 291). In addition to monitoring such communications, which is likely to be difficult without invasive techniques due to their informal nature, formal communication systems can be used to not only espouse ethical values, but also to communicate examples of unethical behavior relevant within the organization. In this way, organizations’ formal systems can help guard against corruption.

Second, though good intentions are not sufficient, they are important. Organizations could make better use of pride in order to promote ethical behavior by linking pride to following formal ethics rules. If initial engagement in compliance results in organizational members’ incurring an affective residue of pride, then not only are they more likely to comply in the future, but they presumably would be inoculated, at least to some extent, against subversive influences within organizations. Further, we assume that a linkage between pride and compliance can help mitigate the problem of moral ambiguity to the extent that it motivates individuals to contact their organizations’ ethics hotlines, which serve in part to reduce ambiguity.

We do not offer the same recommendation for other emotions due to the likelihood of negative side effects. For instance, though shame, guilt, and embarrassment arise naturally in organizations and are often functional in the sense that they act as internal sanctions, voice presumably would be even more inhibited than normal (Kish-Gephart et al. 2009) in organizations that deliberately elicit these emotions to keep employees in line. We do not recommend that organizations’ deliberately attempt to elicit anger and contempt for similar reasons. We do note, however, that anger in its naturally occurring state can be functional in the sense that it motivates people to fix problems (Fischer and Roseman 2007). Contempt may be dysfunctional in organizations in the sense that it motivates people to disengage (Fischer and Roseman 2007), though one study has shown that our performance may improve when we are held in contempt by others (Melwani and Barsade 2011). In short, of the moral emotions, pride is unique in that its deliberate use by organizations to promote compliance with formal policies and societal norms offers the most effective, dignified channel for redirecting employees away from participation in collective corruption.
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Figure 1 The Emotion-Evoked Corruption Model

- **DIRECT** Other-directed, negative emotion: anger, contempt
- **VICARIOUS** Self-directed, negative emotion: shame, guilt, embarrassment
- **DIRECT** Self-directed, positive emotion: pride
- **VICARIOUS**
- **Moral Judgment, Affective Residue Misaligned with Corruption**
- **Moral Judgment, Affective Residue More Aligned with Corruption**
- **Future Participation In Corruption**

Key:
- P1b, 6b, 7c
- P3a, 6a
- P7b
- P7a
- P8b
- P8a
- P8c