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RESEARCH ARTICLE

An actor-centric perspective on leader word-action misalignment: Leader locus of control, shame, and behavioural responses

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Abstract

Leader word-action misalignment has important implications for employees' attitudes and behaviour, but we do not know how it affects leaders themselves. Adopting an actor-centric perspective and integrating insights from research on moral emotions to further develop behavioural integrity theory, we investigate how leaders respond to their own word-action misalignment and how locus of control moderates the relationship between leader word-action misalignment and leader shame, to affect leader avoidance behaviour and task performance. We test the hypothesized relationships in three studies conducted using both experimental and time-separated designs. Across the studies we found that leader word-action misalignment was positively related to leader shame and that locus of control moderated the relationship such that the relationship between leader word-action misalignment and leader shame was stronger for leaders with lower internal locus of control. We also found support for the hypothesized conditional indirect effect of word-action misalignment on leader avoidance and task performance: word-action misalignment was associated with more leader avoidance behaviour and lower leader performance, mediated by leader shame, and more strongly so for leaders with lower internal locus of control. We discuss theoretical and managerial implications of taking an actor-centric perspective in the study of leader word-action misalignment.

KEYWORDS

avoidance behaviour, leader word-action misalignment, shame, task performance

Practitioner points

- Demonstrating word-action misalignment makes leaders feel ashamed.
- Leaders feel more ashamed when they do not walk the talk and they lack control in their own life.
- When leaders do not show word-action consistency and they feel they lack control, they are more likely to disengage from tasks and hide from employees.

INTRODUCTION

Leader word-action misalignment is highly consequential for employees and organizations (Simons, 2002; Simons et al., 2022). When leaders do not keep their promises and do not act on their espoused beliefs and values, employees lose trust in their leader, resulting in lower organizational commitment, task performance, and citizenship behaviour (Simons et al., 2015). Extant research on leader word-action misalignment is follower-centric: it focuses on employees' perceptions of leader word-action misalignment and has provided important insights into employees' perceptions and responses to leader word-action misalignment. However, as leaders' perceptions of their own behaviour affect their emotions and subsequent behaviour (Kaluza et al., 2020; Yeung & Shen, 2019), which eventually have strong implications for employee and organizational outcomes (Rajah et al., 2011; Sy et al., 2005), we argue that it is important to complement the follower-centric perspective on leader word-action misalignment with a leader-centric perspective that captures how their own perceptions of their word-action misalignment affect leaders. This is the perspective we develop in the current study.

Demonstrating consistency between words and actions signals credibility and indicates that the leader is reliable and can be trusted (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007, 2011; Simons, 2002). Word-action alignment has been argued to be an important virtue of leaders, an essential component of moral character, and necessary for ensuring moral uprightness (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007, 2009; Simons et al., 2007). The perspective we propose here is that this view of leader word-action (mis)alignment is not just part of how followers perceive their leaders, but also how leaders view their own leadership: when leaders fail to act on their espoused beliefs and values or break their promises, this may reflect negatively on how they experience their own actions. Individuals' violation of their moral standards exposes defects in their moral character, which makes them feel bad about themselves, resulting in feelings of shame (Greenbaum et al., 2020; Tangney et al., 1996, 2007). Drawing on Simons' (2002) behavioural integrity theory as our overarching theory and by integrating insights from research on moral emotions (Greenbaum et al., 2020; Tangney et al., 2007), we argue that leader word-action misalignment is positively related to leader shame.

Shame stems from negative self-evaluations when one fails to live up to moral standards, triggering one to believe that one will be viewed as an inherently bad person by others (Bonner et al., 2017; Greenbaum et al., 2020). Shame arises in particular when failure to meet moral standards can be attributed to aspects of oneself one does not control (e.g., lack of ability). That is, people feel more shame for actions they perceive to result from their shortcomings than for actions they perceive to be under their control (Kim et al., 2011; Stuewig & Tangney, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2006). Applied to word-action misalignment, this means that word-action misalignment inspires shame particularly when

leaders perceive their word-action misalignment resulted from actions they did not fully control. For instance, leaders may not deliver on their promises because they were unable to recognize constraints that stood in the way of making good on those promises (cf. Parke et al., 2018). Research on moral emotions suggests that this sense of lack of control over morally questionable actions in particular feeds into shame. The role of lack of control over one's actions in causing shame is also reflected in the finding that feelings of shame are accompanied by perceptions of being helpless, powerless, and inferior (Tangney et al., 2007). These insights stress that in understanding how shame may follow from word-action misalignment, it is important to understand the role of leaders' sense of control over their actions.

One leader trait we propose is particularly relevant in this respect is locus of control. Locus of control captures the extent to which individuals believe they control their own actions and circumstances (Galvin et al., 2018; Rotter, 1966). Those with a strong internal locus of control believe that events in their life are controlled by their own actions. In contrast, those with a strong external locus of control believe that events in their life are controlled by others (Galvin et al., 2018). Individuals lower in internal locus of control and higher in external locus of control generally feel more helpless and less in control (Eib et al., 2015). As such, while feeling responsible for their actions, individuals lower in internal locus of control may feel less able to control negative events and avoid failures. Thus, when demonstrating word-action misalignment, leaders lower in internal locus of control will experience more shame due to their sense of being less able to control their word-action consistency.

A large body of research has found that feelings of shame, due to the negative evaluation of one's impaired and exposed character, prompt individuals to protect their self by socially hiding from and avoiding others (Greenbaum et al., 2020; Tangney et al., 2007). Therefore, we expect that leader shame originating from leader word-action misalignment will propel leaders to avoid their employees. Apart from increasing avoidance behaviour, shame can also harm job performance (e.g., Bagozzi et al., 2003; Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2002). Individuals hit by feelings of shame can be so preoccupied by the emotion that it hinders their functioning and distracts them from focusing on the task and performing (cf. Ogunfowora et al., 2023). Therefore, we argue that leader word-action misalignment resulting in shame is associated with lower leader task performance.

Based on this, we propose that leader word-action misalignment has a positive indirect effect on leader avoidance behaviour through (higher) leader shame and a negative indirect effect on leader task performance through (higher) leader shame. As leaders lower in internal locus of control can be expected to experience more shame when they demonstrate word-action misalignment, we therefore propose that the indirect effect of leader word-action misalignment on outcomes is stronger when leader internal locus of control is lower. This is particularly critical to leaders and organizations because leaders need to engage with and support their employees to achieve group goals and perform due to their role in organizations (Byrne et al., 2014; Hoch et al., 2018; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Figure 1 depicts our
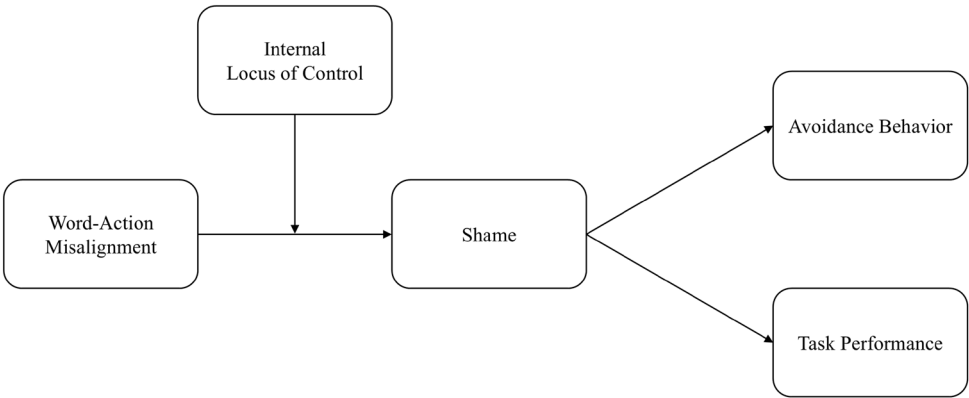

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

conceptual model of the relationships between leader word-action misalignment, leader internal locus of control, leader shame, and leader behavioural outcomes.

Our study makes important contributions to leader behavioural integrity theory (Simons, 2002) by complementing the dominant follower-centric perspective with a novel leader-centric perspective. This is important to the development of behavioural integrity theory because our study shows that not only followers' perception of leader word-action misalignment (i.e., the low end of the behavioural integrity continuum) has important implications for organizational behaviour; leaders' perception of their own word-action misalignment does too. Extending behavioural integrity theory, we argue and show that the more leaders experience word-action misalignment, the more they feel ashamed (an emotion associated with moral shortcoming; Greenbaum et al., 2020; Tangney et al., 2007). This has indirect (i.e., mediated by leader shame) downstream consequences for leader avoidance behaviour and task performance. Our analysis can also be understood to respond to the recent call from Simons et al. (2022) to study conditions that may attenuate or accentuate the impact of word-action misalignment, in that we establish a moderating role for leader locus of control: the less leaders feel in control of events (i.e., with lower internal locus of control; Galvin et al., 2018; Rotter, 1966), the more leader word-action misalignment results in shame and the associated negative consequences for leader behaviour. This focus on moral emotions—feeling ashamed for one's actions—also underscores that the effects of leader word-action misalignment cannot be extrapolated from follower-centric research (i.e., leader shame in response to their own behaviour would not be suggested by consideration of follower experience of leader word-action misalignment). Our study thus can also be understood to underscore that the leader-centric study of behavioural integrity is valuable in its own right and cannot be extrapolated from follower-centric research.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Behavioural integrity or word-action misalignment refers to the perceived alignment between an actor's words and actions (Simons, 2002; Simons et al., 2022). Building on this, we define leader word-action misalignment as the perceived misalignment between a leader's words and actions. While Simons (2002) initially focused on employees' perceptions of their leader's pattern of word-action (mis)alignment when he introduced behavioural integrity as a construct, he did not clearly specify who (actor or observer) would evaluate the (mis)alignment between an actor's words and actions. It was not until recently that Simons et al. (2022) noted that behavioural integrity is based on an observer's perceptions. Following this perspective, extant research has focused entirely on employees' perceptions of their leader's word-action misalignment, except for a few studies on organizational word-action misalignment (e.g., Ete et al., 2022), to examine the impact of leader behavioural integrity on employees' attitudes and behaviour (Simons et al., 2015). This is an important omission as leaders' perceptions of their own behaviour are critical for their emotions and behaviour (e.g., Kaluza et al., 2020; Weiss et al., 2017; Yeung & Shen, 2019), which eventually have implications for employee and organizational outcomes (Rajah et al., 2011). Therefore, just as employees' perceptions of their leaders' word-action misalignment can substantially influence employees' trust in their leaders, organizational commitment, and performance (Simons et al., 2015), we argue that there is a need to understand the impact of leaders' perceptions of their own word-action misalignment. As such, we complement the follower-centric "observer tradition" and introduce an actor-centric perspective to the study of leader word-action misalignment, focusing on how leaders respond when demonstrating word-action misalignment.

Leader behavioural integrity, locus of control, and shame

When leaders follow through on their espoused values and promises, they establish themselves as reliable and trustworthy leaders (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007, 2011; Simons, 2002). Good moral character is

comprised of different virtues including alignment of words and deeds (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009), which is related to virtuous behaviour (Palanski & Yammarino, 2011). Demonstrating this alignment is not only an essential virtue of being a good leader but also a necessity for upholding good moral character and ensuring moral uprightness (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007, 2009; Simons et al., 2007). Therefore, we argue that leaders will doubt their own moral character and what they stand for when they experience inconsistency between their words and deeds (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007, 2009). Keeping promises and following through on what one has committed to is generally viewed as part of the norms and standards of how people should behave (Antonakis & Day, 2017; Rousseau, 1995; Shank et al., 2019), suggesting that leaders should feel bad about their own character when they demonstrate word-action misalignment.

When people violate moral standards, they experience feelings of shame—a painful and unpleasant emotional response—as the violation indicates they have a faulty moral character (Greenbaum et al., 2020; Leary, 2007; Tangney et al., 2007). For this self-condemning moral emotion, the focus is on the person's global self. As such, violation of moral standards prompts the person to go through a negative evaluation of the entire self and character, exposing flaws in their moral character, which makes the person feel bad about themselves in ways that elicit shame (Tangney et al., 1996, 2007). Based on this, we argue that when leaders display word-action misalignment, they experience that they violate their moral standards, making them feel bad about themselves and their moral character, resulting in feelings of shame (Greenbaum et al., 2020; Tangney et al., 1996, 2007). Therefore, we argue that leader word-action misalignment is positively related to leader shame (conversely, lower word-action misalignment is associated with lower leader shame; even when our study's focus is first and foremost on what happens with leader word-action misalignment, the implication is that leaders showing word-action alignment—behavioural integrity—experience no shame from this).

Hypothesis 1. Leader word-action misalignment is positively related to leader shame.

Individuals experience shame particularly when they attribute their failure to meet moral standards to aspects of themselves they have less control over—when their failure seems to reflect a shortcoming on their part (Kim et al., 2011; Stuewig & Tangney, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2006). In addition to leaders feeling less able to demonstrate word-action alignment due to their own traits (Simons, 2002) and their inability to recognize constraints in the context (cf. Parke et al., 2018), leaders' tendency to espouse wishful thinking to motivate employees may backfire, causing the leader to question their own abilities as a leader (cf. Simons, 2002). Thus, when demonstrating word-action misalignment and experiencing a lack of control in ensuring word-action alignment, leaders will feel bad about themselves, giving rise to feelings of shame. Particularly given the role of lack of controllability in eliciting shame (Kim et al., 2011; Stuewig & Tangney, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2006), we focus on the role of leaders' sense of control over their actions as an important factor in relation to their feelings of shame.

According to research on locus of control, people vary in terms of the extent to which they believe they control their own circumstances (Galvin et al., 2018; Rotter, 1966). Individuals characterized by a higher internal locus of control believe events in their life are controlled by their own actions, whereas those with a higher external (and thus lower internal) locus of control believe events in their life are controlled by others and events outside of their control (Galvin et al., 2018; Spector, 1988). Furthermore, individuals lower in internal locus of control generally feel more helpless and not in control (Eib et al., 2015). Therefore, individuals lower in internal locus of control may feel less able to avoid failures and control negative events, which matters for feelings of shame, as a sense of being responsible but less able to control the moral violation fuels feelings of shame (e.g., Kim et al., 2011; Stuewig & Tangney, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2006). Indeed, research has shown that people experience more shame when they lack control over events in their life (e.g., Harder, 1990; Rubenstein, 2021; Woien et al., 2003). Based on these considerations, we argue that leaders lower in internal locus of control will experience more shame when demonstrating word-action misalignment because they believe they are less able to control their word-action alignment and therefore more likely to see it as a result of their own

shortcomings as compared with leaders higher in internal locus of control, who are more likely to view their word-action misalignment as volitional (and therefore presumably justified by circumstances). Put differently, the positive relationship of word-action misalignment with shame is stronger for leaders with lower internal locus of control.

> **Hypothesis 2.** The positive relationship between leader word-action misalignment and leader shame is moderated by leader internal locus of control such that the relationship is stronger when internal locus of control is lower.

Leader behaviour as outcomes of leader word-action misalignment, locus of control, and shame

Shame is associated with withdrawal and avoiding others (Greenbaum et al., 2020; Tangney et al., 2007). Violation of standards and norms leads to self-scrutiny of the person's exposed and damaged global self. The individual will experience that the self falls short of moral standards and will feel that they have been publicly exposed (exposure to a real or imagined audience). As a response, the individual will try to protect the self by engaging in behavioural avoidance because they want to hide from others and shrink away to conceal their flawed character (Tangney et al., 1996, 2014). Shame has been associated with isolating oneself from others and socially withdrawing, hiding, and disappearing, making one want to sink into the floor and disappear (de Hooge et al., 2018).

Therefore, we argue that when leaders do not show consistency between their words and actions, they will feel bad about their flawed self, which will elicit shame, leading them to want to hide from employees in their team, increasing leader avoidance behaviour. Thus, we expect that leader shame elicited by leader word-action misalignment will propel leaders to avoid their employees—leader shame mediates an indirect effect of word-action misalignment on leader avoidance behaviour. Based on the rationale that leads us to predict that the relationship between leader word-action misalignment and leader shame is stronger with lower leader internal locus of control (Hypothesis 2), we propose that lower internal locus of control strengthens the indirect effect of word-action misalignment on leader avoidance. With lower internal locus of control, word-action misalignment more strongly results in shame. As a consequence, because shame invites avoidance behaviour, word-action misalignment has a stronger positive indirect effect on leader avoidance behaviour with lower internal locus of control.

> **Hypothesis 3.** The positive indirect effect of leader word-action misalignment on leader avoidance behaviour through leader shame is moderated by internal locus of control. The relationship is stronger when internal locus of control is lower.

Not only does shame make people want to hide, but it also affects their performance. Shame is a dysphoric emotion, which affects individuals' functioning and distracts them from focusing on their tasks and hinders them from performing at work (Ogunfowora et al., 2023; Tangney et al., 1992). The negative self-evaluation connected with shame drains individuals of psychological resources, resulting in ashamed individuals feeling paralysed (Harder & Lewis, 2013). As such, shame should attenuate individuals' performance at work. Following this logic, research has shown that shame reduces task performance (e.g., Bagozzi et al., 2003; Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2002). Furthermore, the painful self-reflection triggered by shame will make the individual worry that they have such a bad character that cannot be changed, leading the individual to disengage from their tasks (Bohns & Flynn, 2013). Therefore, we argue that leader shame stemming from word-action misalignment harms task performance; word-action misalignment indirectly, mediated by shame, negatively affects performance. Again, drawing on the rationale for Hypothesis 2 concerning the moderating role of locus of control, we propose that lower internal locus of control strengthens the negative indirect effect of word-action misalignment on

leader task performance as mediated by leader shame. For leader task performance too, we thus predict moderated mediation.

> **Hypothesis 4.** The negative indirect effect of leader word-action misalignment on leader task performance through leader shame is moderated by internal locus of control. The relationship is stronger when internal locus of control is lower.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We conducted three studies to test our hypotheses, which together examine how and when leader word-action misalignment is related to leader emotional and behavioral outcomes. In Study 1 ($N = 216$) we used a critical incident recall design and collected data from managers in the United Kingdom. In Study 2 ($N = 203$) we used a scenario experiment and collected data from managers in the United States. In Study 3 ($N = 413$), we collected data over three time points with a one-week interval from managers in the United Kingdom. We used Mplus 8.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) to test our hypotheses. Approval for the studies was granted by the first author's university's institutional review board (IRB), and informed consent was obtained from respondents.

The advantage of this three-study multimethod approach is that replication over studies bolsters confidence in our conclusions. While each study stand-alone may be criticized for its limitations (e.g., Study 1 relies on recall of a critical incident; Study 2 concerns a hypothetical situation; Study 3 does not yield causal evidence), limitations unique to one of the study designs cannot explain replication across methods. That is, the most parsimonious explanation for findings that replicate across methods does not involve study-specific method attributes, which gives greater confidence that they concern the relationships as conceptualized.

STUDY 1

Participants and procedure

We performed an a priori power analysis to determine an adequate sample size to detect significant effects. Due to the complexity of the hypothesized moderated mediation model and the lack of a direct method to estimate the required sample size per condition, we ran a Monte Carlo simulation with 1000 replications and Monte Carlo 95% confidence intervals (Donnelly et al., 2023) using the *simsem* package (Pornprasertmanit et al., 2021) in R. Assuming theoretically plausible path coefficients consistent with our hypotheses (i.e., interaction effect of $\beta = .30$), results indicated sufficient power (>.80) to detect the moderated mediation index with sample sizes above 100 participants per condition. Sensitivity analyses revealed that when assuming different standard deviations for the moderator or weaker effect sizes, power for some conditional indirect effects dropped below the .80 threshold.

To surpass this requirement, we recruited 220 participants via Prolific who were compensated for their participation in a recall-based study. We decided to employ the recall method as this approach enabled us to examine actual, naturally occurring incidents in the workplace, eventually resulting in higher external validity. We excluded four participants who were not full-time employed in an organization, had no responsibility for managing other people as part of their job, and had no direct reports, which resulted in a final sample of 216 managers. Of the 216 managers, 44.9% were female, their average age was 39.70 years ($SD = 9.80$), their average job tenure was 8.76 years ($SD = 7.62$), and their average tenure with their team was 4.31 years ($SD = 3.81$).

Word-action misalignment manipulation

First, participants rated their locus of control and then they were randomly assigned to either a high word-action misalignment condition ($N = 111$) or a low word-action misalignment condition ($N = 105$). After the manipulation, participants rated their shame, task performance, and avoidance behaviour. Afterwards, they completed the manipulation check and responded to demographic questions.

In the high word-action misalignment condition, participants were asked as follows: Please recall a particular incident at work in which you experienced that you as a manager did not keep your promises. This would be an incident in which you did not do what you had promised employees in your team. Please describe this situation—what happened, how you felt, and any other relevant information. Please describe the incident as vividly as you can.

In the low word-action misalignment condition, participants were asked as follows: Please recall a particular incident at work in which you experienced that you as a manager did keep your promises. This would be an incident in which you did do what you had promised employees in your team. Please describe this situation—what happened, how you felt, and any other relevant information. Please describe the incident as vividly as you can.

Measures

Leader internal locus of control

To measure internal locus of control, we used the three-item internal locus of control scale (Ryon & Gleason, 2014). Participants rated items on a seven-point scale ranging from −3 (*Strongly Disagree*) to +3 (*Strongly Agree*). A sample items is "I feel that I have control over the things that happen to me" ($\alpha = .76$).

Leader shame

Shame was measured with the five-item scale by Marschall et al. (1994). Participants were asked to think back to the incident at work that they just described and rate each statement based on how they were "feeling right now, that is, at the present moment" (e.g., "I feel like I am a bad person") ($\alpha = .90$). Items were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at All*) to 5 (*Extremely*).

Leader task performance

Task performance was measured with four non-reversed items from the in-role behaviour measure by Williams and Anderson (1991) in order for leaders to evaluate their own performance behaviour. Participants were asked to think back to the incident at work that they just described and then presented with the stem of "I would probably…" followed by the items (e.g., "adequately complete assigned duties of my role") ($\alpha = .73$). Items were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from −3 (*Strongly Disagree*) to +3 (*Strongly Agree*).

Leader avoidance behaviour

To measure leader avoidance behaviour, we reworded the two avoiding items from Hershcovis et al. (2018) and developed a third item that followed the focus of the items from Hershcovis et al. (2018). The three items are "distance myself from people in my team", "avoid people in my team", and "avoid contact with people in my team" ($\alpha = .96$). Participants were asked to think back to the incident at work

that they just described and then presented with the stem of "I would probably..." followed by the items (e.g., "avoid people in my team"). Items were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from −3 (*Strongly Disagree*) to +3 (*Strongly Agree*).

Control variables

Although random assignment to conditions should mean that characteristics of the participants would not influence our findings (Singleton & Straits, 2005), we did include control variables as we used a recall design, which other researchers have followed as well (e.g., Wellman et al., 2016). We controlled for gender as past research has shown that gender is related to shame (Cohen et al., 2011). We also included age as a control variable because research indicates that performance increases with age (Ng & Feldman, 2008). Finally, we controlled for leaders' tenure with their team as the longer leaders have worked with team members, the more familiar they are with employees, which affects interactions between leaders and their teams and helps leaders become more effective (Hu & Judge, 2017; Wee et al., 2017).

Manipulation check

To assess the efficacy of our word-action misalignment manipulation, we asked participants to think back to the incident at work they just described and to rate the eight behavioural integrity items from Simons et al. (2007). Items were rated on a seven-point scale ranging from −3 (*Strongly Disagree*) to +3 (*Strongly Agree*) and reverse scored so that higher scores reflected word-action misalignment. A sample item is "I delivered on promises" ($\alpha = .95$).

Results

Manipulation check results and descriptive statistics

We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the distinctiveness of word-action misalignment, locus of control, shame, avoidance behaviour, and task performance. Results of the CFAs showed that the proposed five-factor model, with items for the five constructs loading on their respective factors ($\chi^2(220) = 572.35$, $p < .001$, CFI = .92, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .05), provided an acceptable fit to the data. The five-factor model fitted the data better than the four-factor model in which word-action misalignment items loaded on one factor, internal locus of control items loaded on one factor, shame items loaded on one factor, and avoidance behaviour and task performance items loaded on another factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 340.98$, $\Delta df = 4$, $p < .001$). Together, these results support the distinctiveness of our measures.

As expected, participants in the high word-action misalignment condition reported higher levels of word-action misalignment ($M = .13$, $SD = 1.56$) than those in the low word-action misalignment condition ($M = -2.35$, $SD = .74$) and results of an independent t-test showed that the difference between conditions was significant ($t = -15.09$, $df = 159.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.23$). In sum, evidence suggested that the manipulations achieved the intended effect.

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability estimates are presented in Table 1. All correlations between the main variables were significant and in the expected direction ($p < .001$) apart from word-action misalignment, which was not significantly correlated with task performance. None of the control variables were significantly correlated with the main variables, and therefore they were not included in the subsequent analyses.

Hypothesis testing

Results showed that word-action misalignment was positively related to shame ($b = .72$, $SE = .13$, $p < .001$), which supported Hypothesis 1. In support of Hypothesis 2, the interaction between word-action

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities of variables (Study 1).

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	.45	.50	—							
2. Age	39.70	9.80	−.09	—						
3. Tenure with team	4.31	3.81	.04	.45	—					
4. Word-action misalignment	.49	.50	.00	.00	.01	—				
5. Internal locus of control	1.34	.97	.07	.04	.04	−.04	(.76)			
6. Shame	1.34	.66	−.07	.01	.03	.36	−.37	(.90)		
7. Avoidance behaviour	−1.75	1.45	.10	−.03	.00	.31	−.29	.35	(.96)	
8. Task performance	2.05	.74	.10	.04	.09	−.09	.38	−.21	−.29	(.73)

Note: $N = 216$. Within rounding error, correlations greater than .133 in absolute magnitude are significant at $p = .05$; correlations greater than .173 in absolute magnitude are significant at $p = .01$ (both two-tailed tests). Omega coefficients are reported on the diagonal. Gender (0 = male, 1 = female).
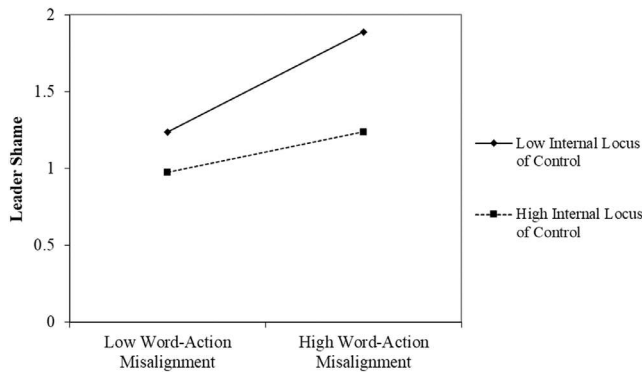

FIGURE 2 Interaction effect of leader word-action misalignment and internal locus of control on leader shame (Study 1).

misalignment and internal locus of control was significant ($b = -.20$, $p = .013$) and simple slope analyses revealed that when internal locus of control was lower, the slope was steeper (1 *SD* below the mean, simple slope = .65, $p < .001$) than when internal locus of control was higher (1 *SD* above the mean, simple slope = .26, $p = .015$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Figure 2 shows a plot of the relationship between word-action misalignment and shame at high versus low levels (±1 SD) of internal locus of control (Aiken & West, 1991). Consistent with our prediction, Figure 2 shows that those lower in internal locus of control compared to those higher in internal locus of control feel more ashamed when not keeping their promises and acting on values.

To test the conditional indirect effects, we used 10,000 bootstrapped resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs). Results of moderated mediation analyses showed that the indirect effect of word-action misalignment on avoidance behaviour via shame was significant for lower levels of internal locus of control (estimate = .39, 95% CI [.158, .701]) and for higher levels (estimate = .16, 95% CI [.048, .363]). The effects were significantly different (index of moderated mediation = −.12, 95% CI [−.300, −.020]). For task performance, the indirect effect of word-action misalignment on task performance via shame was significant for lower levels of internal locus of control (estimate = −.15, 95% CI [−.280, −.041]) and for higher levels (estimate = −.06, 95% CI [−.133, −.018]). The effects were significantly different (index of moderated mediation = .05, 95% CI [.003, .116]). Based on this, Hypotheses 3 and 4 were supported.

Thus, Study 1 provided support for leader word-action misalignment resulting in leader shame and for internal locus of control moderating this relationship such that those lower in internal locus of control felt more ashamed when not keeping their promises and acting on values. We also found that the indirect effect of word-action misalignment on task performance and avoidance behaviour via shame was stronger when internal locus of control was lower. As such, this supports our hypotheses that leaders' performance is lower and avoidance behaviour is higher when leaders feel less in control and they do not demonstrate word-action alignment. A limitation of this study is that we measured intent to engage in avoidance and task performance behaviours. Although research has shown that intentions correlate with behaviour (Webb & Sheeran, 2006), we did not measure perceptions about actual avoidance behaviour or task performance. Despite the benefits of the critical incident recall approach to this study in terms of providing external validity, this research design is subject to respondents referring to different situations of word-action misalignment. As such, there was less control of the manipulation, and we therefore tested our hypotheses in Study 2 with a scenario design.

STUDY 2

Participants and procedure

We used an experiment with a scenario design and recruited 211 participants via Prolific who were compensated for their participation. We used the scenario method as this approach allowed us to hold constant extraneous factors resulting in higher internal validity. We excluded eight participants who had no responsibility for managing other people as part of their job, which resulted in a final sample of 203 full-time employed managers. Of the 203 managers, 47.8% were female, their average age was 41.10 years ($SD = 10.70$), their average job tenure was 8.68 years ($SD = 7.26$), and their average management experience was 8.61 years ($SD = 6.41$). Sample job titles are IT director, sales manager, assistant director, and training manager.

Word-action misalignment manipulation

First, participants rated their internal locus of control and then they were randomly assigned to either the high word-action misalignment ($N = 102$) or the low word-action misalignment ($N = 101$) condition. After the manipulation, participants rated their shame, task performance, and avoidance behaviour. Participants were asked to imagine themselves in the managerial role of a project director at the headquarters of a large national IT services company and that in this role, they lead a team that reports directly to them. Furthermore, they were asked to imagine that their company recently took on an important project requiring the participant's team to work intensively to develop a new IT solution for a major client and that their primary responsibility was to guide their team towards the successful completion of this project. The two word-action misalignment scenarios are presented below.

High word-action misalignment

Prior to accepting the project, you assured your team you would provide your full support and commitment to timely deliver your part on time. You also promised your team that they would receive a bonus if project deadlines were met. However, just one week after starting the project, you missed the initial deadline by failing to deliver the project plan, which you were responsible for. Thus, your actions so far have not aligned with the priorities you initially described. During a recent status meeting, you met with your team to evaluate the project's progress and plan for the future. In this meeting, you emphasized the importance of each member's contribution, yourself included,

as essential for achieving the team's goals. You assured people in the team that they could rely on you to fulfil your responsibilities. You highlighted the importance of adhering to deadlines, actively listening to others' ideas, and the fundamental need for everyone to always uphold their promises and commitments. A week after the meeting, you have again prioritized other work, resulting in you not meeting your project commitments and deadlines. Moreover, you have not practiced what you preached, as you have not taken the time to listen to your employees' thoughts and suggestions, as you initially promised. Thus, you see a pattern of you consistently failing to fulfil what you said you would do. You also heard from others that your team has noted you are habitually unreliable in keeping promises. As such, it is very clear to you that you have not delivered the promised support and done what you said you would do. Ultimately, observing your consistent lack of attention to keeping promises has affected project deadlines; you realize that you cannot endorse the team for the project bonus you clearly promised them before the start of the project. Accordingly, you just sent an email to your team to communicate your decision. Reflecting on this, you are now thinking about the entire situation at work, especially about what you promised, said, and did.

Low word-action misalignment

Prior to accepting the project, you assured your team you would provide your full support and commitment to timely deliver your part on time. You also promised your team that they would receive a bonus if project deadlines were met. In fact, within just one week after starting the project, you met the initial deadline by succeeding to deliver the project plan, which you were responsible for. Thus, your actions so far have aligned with the priorities you initially described. During a recent status meeting, you met with your team to evaluate the project's progress and plan for the future. In this meeting, you emphasized the importance of each member's contribution, yourself included, as essential for achieving the team's goals. You assured people in the team that they could rely on you to fulfil your responsibilities. You highlighted the importance of adhering to deadlines, actively listening to others' ideas, and the fundamental need for everyone to always uphold their promises and commitments. A week after the meeting, you have again prioritized this project, resulting in you meeting your project commitments and deadlines. Moreover, you have practiced what you preached as you have taken the time to listen to your employees' thoughts and suggestions as you initially promised. Thus, you see a pattern of you consistently fulfilling what you said you would do. You also heard from others that your team has noted you are habitually reliable in keeping promises. As such, it is very clear to you that you have delivered the promised support and done what you said you would do. Ultimately, observing your consistent attention to keeping promises has affected project deadlines — you realize that you can endorse the team for the project bonus you clearly promised them before the start of the project. Accordingly, you just sent an email to your team to communicate your decision. Reflecting on this, you are now thinking about the entire situation at work, especially about what you promised, said, and did.

Measures

We used age and gender as control variables as in Study 1. For leader internal locus of control, similar to others studies (e.g., Johnson et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2000), we used six internal locus of control items from Levenson (1981). Items were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from −3 (*Strongly Disagree*) to +3 (*Strongly Agree*). A sample item is "I can pretty much determine what will happen in my life" ($\alpha = .81$). For shame, avoidance behaviour, and task performance, participants were asked to think back to the scenario that they had just read. For each of the variables, they were presented with the stem of "If I truly found myself in the situation, I would probably…" followed by the items. We used the same rating scales and measures of shame ($\alpha = .97$) and avoidance behaviours ($\alpha = .98$) as in Study 1. For task performance, we used the three item measure by Griffin et al. (2007). Items were measured on a seven-point

scale ranging from −3 (*Strongly Disagree*) to +3 (*Strongly Agree*). A sample item is "carry out the core parts of my job well" ($\alpha = .96$).

Results

Manipulation check results and descriptive statistics

Results of the CFAs showed that the four-factor model, with items for internal locus of control, shame, avoidance behaviour, and task performance loading on their respective factors ($\chi^2(113) = 175.70, p < .001$, CFI = .98, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04), provided a good fit to the data. The four-factor model fitted the data better than the three-factor model in which internal locus of control items loaded on one factor, shame items loaded on one factor, and avoidance behaviour and task performance items loaded on another factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 896.91, \Delta df = 3, p < .001$). Together, these results support the distinctiveness of our measures.

We followed recommendations by Lonati et al. (2018) and conducted manipulation checks using an independent sample ($N = 58$) of managers via Prolific to avoid the manipulation checks creating demand effects. Respondents were randomly assigned to the high or low word-action misalignment condition. After reading the scenario, they were asked to rate the level of word-action misalignment using the scale we used in Study 1. As expected, participants in the high word-action misalignment condition reported higher levels of word-action misalignment ($M = 1.47, SD = 1.88$) than those in the low word-action misalignment condition ($M = −2.59, SD = .61$). Results of an independent *t*-test showed that the difference between conditions was significant ($t = −11.23, df = 35.50, p < .001, d = 1.42$). In sum, evidence suggested that the manipulations achieved the intended effect.

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability estimates are presented in Table 2. All correlations between the main variables were significant and in the expected direction ($p < .001$). None of the control variables were significantly correlated with the main variables and therefore they were not included in the subsequent analyses.

Hypothesis testing

Results showed that word-action misalignment was positively related to shame ($b = 2.48, SE = .33, p < .001$), which supported Hypothesis 1. In support of Hypothesis 2, the interaction between word-action misalignment and internal locus of control was significant ($b = −.41, p = .034$) and simple slope analyses revealed that when internal locus of control was lower, the slope was steeper (1 *SD* below the

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities of variables (Study 2).

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	.48	.50	—						
2. Age	41.10	10.70	.09	—					
3. Word-action misalignment	.50	.50	−.07	.08	—				
4. Internal locus of control	1.55	.78	.07	.15	.00	(.81)			
5. Shame	2.49	1.42	.02	.05	.65	−.05	(.97)		
6. Avoidance behaviour	−1.18	1.75	−.05	−.08	.44	−.14	.55	(.98)	
7. Task performance	2.29	1.04	.08	.06	−.18	.14	−.24	−.37	(.96)

Note: $N = 203$. Within rounding error, correlations greater than .137 in absolute magnitude are significant at $p = .05$; correlations greater than .179 in absolute magnitude are significant at $p = .01$ (both two-tailed tests). Omega coefficients are reported on the diagonal. Gender (0 = male, 1 = female).
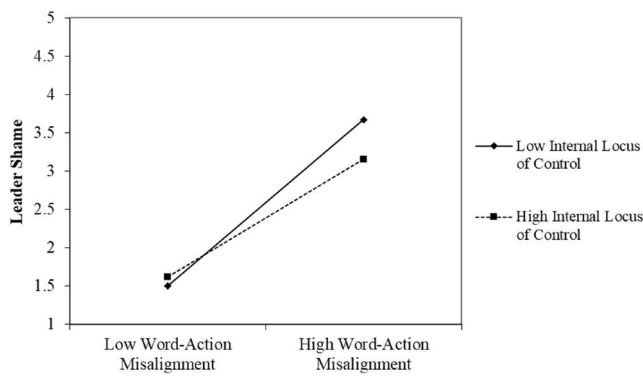
FIGURE 3 Interaction effect of leader word-action misalignment and internal locus of control on leader shame (Study 2).

mean, simple slope = 2.16, $p < .001$) than when internal locus of control was higher (1 SD above the mean, simple slope = 1.53, $p < .001$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Figure 3 shows a plot of the relationship between word-action misalignment and shame at high versus low levels (±1 SD) of internal locus of control (Aiken & West, 1991). Consistent with our prediction, Figure 3 shows that those lower in internal locus of control compared to those higher in internal locus of control feel more ashamed when not keeping their promises and acting on values.

Results of moderated mediation analyses showed that the indirect effect of word-action misalignment on avoidance behaviour via shame was significant for lower levels of internal locus of control (estimate = 1.24, 95% CI [.717, 1.851]) and for higher levels (estimate = .88, 95% CI [.501, 1.394]). The effects were significantly different (index of moderated mediation = −.23, 95% CI [−.529, −.030]). For task performance, the indirect effect of word-action misalignment on task performance via shame was significant for lower levels of internal locus of control (estimate = −.72, 95% CI [−1.865, −.196]) and for higher levels (estimate = −.51, 95% CI [−1.474, −.137]). The effects were significantly different (index of moderated mediation = .14, 95% CI [.022, .457]). Thus, Hypotheses 3 and 4 were supported.

Thus, Study 2 supported our hypotheses that leader word-action misalignment increases shame, and that internal locus of control moderates the relationship between leader word-action misalignment and shame such that those lower in internal locus of control feel more ashamed when not keeping their promises or acting on values. Results also showed that the indirect effect of word-action misalignment on task performance and avoidance behaviour via shame was stronger when internal locus of control was lower. Thus, similar to Study 1, results of Study 2 confirm our hypotheses. Similar to Study 1, a limitation of Study 2 is that we measured intent to engage in avoidance and task performance behaviours. We address this limitation in Study 3. Furthermore, while the scenario design is desirable for establishing internal validity, it potentially lacks ecological validity and therefore to strengthen this part we conducted a field study in Study 3 to test our hypotheses.

STUDY 3

We used a time-lagged design with three time points separated by a one-week interval and collected a sample of 800 leaders from the United Kingdom via Prolific. Respondents were compensated for their participation. Respondents first completed a screening survey with demographic questions (Time 0). Depending on their answers, respondents were then invited to complete a questionnaire for Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3. To be invited after Time 0, respondents had to be working in a full-time job and be responsible for managing other people as part of their job. Following Chmielewski and Kucker (2020), we used attention checks, evaluated responses to open-ended questions, and

checked response inconsistency to remove low quality data. Thus, if respondents did not pass our checks at one timepoint, they would not be invited to participate at later timepoints. Of the 800 respondents at Time 0, we further evaluated 572 respondents who were full-time employed, had responsibility for managing other people in their job, and passed our attention check. We received 531 completed responses at Time 1 (response rate of 92.8%), 489 completed responses at Time 2 (response rate of 92.1%), and 445 completed responses at Time 3 (response rate of 91.0%). Respondents who did not pass our consistency and attention checks were removed, which reduced the final sample to 413 leaders.

Of these, 39.2% were female and respondents were 42.28 years of age on average ($SD = 10.30$). Respondents had on average 22.12 years of work experience ($SD = 10.35$) and 9.72 years of management experience ($SD = 7.75$). On average, they had worked for the organization for 10.07 years ($SD = 8.34$), worked in their job for 6.83 years ($SD = 6.22$), and worked with their team for 4.09 years ($SD = 3.65$). Respondents worked in different functional areas, including accounting and finance (12.6%), administration (7.0%), arts and design (.2%), education and training (8.5%), engineering (2.4%), information technology (12.8%), general management (15.7%), marketing, sales and business development (6.3%), operations (14.5%), and other functions (19.9%).

Measures

We used the same control variables and measures for word-action misalignment, shame, avoidance behaviour, and task performance as in Study 1. For leader internal locus of control, we used the same measure as in Study 2. At Time 1, leaders evaluated word-action misalignment ($\alpha = .91$), internal locus of control ($\alpha = .74$), avoidance behaviour ($\alpha = .88$), and task performance ($\alpha = .66$). At Time 2, they evaluated their feelings of shame ($\alpha = .91$) and at Time 3, they evaluated their avoidance behaviour ($\alpha = .89$) and task performance ($\alpha = .75$).

Results

Results of the CFAs showed that the proposed seven-factor model, with items for word-action misalignment (Time 1), locus of control (Time 1), shame (Time 2), avoidance behaviour (Times 1 and 3), and task performance (Times 1 and 3) loading on their respective factors ($\chi^2(474) = 1022.42$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .05), provided an acceptable fit to the data. The seven-factor model fitted the data better than the five-factor model in which word-action misalignment items loaded on one factor, internal locus of control items loaded on one factor, avoidance behaviour and task performance items (Time 1) loaded on one factor, shame items loaded on one factor, and avoidance behaviour and task performance items (Time 3) loaded on another factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1776.44$, $\Delta df = 11$, $p < .001$) and the four-factor model in which word-action misalignment and shame items loaded on one factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3021.52$, $\Delta df = 15$, $p < .001$). Together, these results support the distinctiveness of our measures.

Table 3 presents means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability estimates for the Study 3 measures. We used the same analytical approach as applied in Studies 1 and 2 to test our hypotheses.

Results of the analyses with and without control variables did not lead to any change in overall conclusions. Therefore, we report the results without controls (Becker, 2005). Hypothesis 1 predicted that word-action misalignment would be positively related to shame, which was supported ($b = .35$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 2 predicted that this relationship would be stronger for lower levels of internal locus of control. As expected, the interaction between word-action misalignment and internal locus of control on shame was significant ($b = -.17$, $p < .001$). Results of simple slopes analyses plotted in Figure 4 showed that when internal locus of control was lower the effect of word-action misalignment on shame was significant and higher (1 SD below the mean, simple slope = .23, $p < .001$) than when internal locus

TABLE 3 Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities of variables (Study 3).

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender (T0)	.39	.49	—									
2. Age (T0)	42.28	10.30	−.01	—								
3. Tenure with team (T0)	4.09	3.65	.06	.50	—							
4. Word-action misalignment (T1)	2.27	.58	−.09	−.28	−.23	(.91)						
5. Internal locus of control (T1)	1.42	.72	.06	.13	.18	−.50	(.74)					
6. Avoidance behaviour (T1)	−2.11	1.11	.03	−.23	−.15	.41	−.24	(.88)				
7. Task performance (T1)	2.16	.68	.12	.26	.23	−.58	.44	−.25	(.66)			
8. Shame (T2)	1.18	.47	.02	−.19	−.11	.27	−.28	.24	−.30	(.91)		
9. Avoidance behaviour (T3)	−2.00	1.22	.08	−.19	−.12	.39	−.19	.63	−.22	.34	(.89)	
10.Task performance (T3)	2.15	.71	.16	.28	.20	−.56	.48	−.26	.64	−.35	−.26	(.75)

Note: $N = 413$. Within rounding error, correlations greater than .096 in absolute magnitude are significant at $p = .05$; correlations greater than .126 in absolute magnitude are significant at $p = .01$ (both two-tailed tests). Omega coefficients are reported on the diagonal. Gender (0 = male, 1 = female). T0 = Screening; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3.
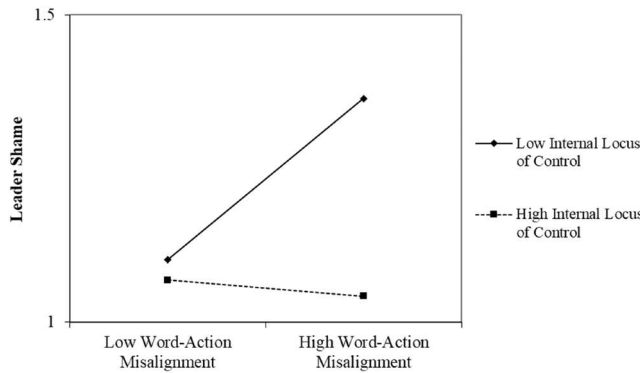

FIGURE 4 Interaction effect of leader word-action misalignment and internal locus of control on leader shame (Study 3).

of control was higher (1 *SD* above the mean, simple slope = −.02, $p = .716$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

The conditional indirect effect of word-action misalignment on avoidance behaviour via shame was significant for lower levels of internal locus of control (estimate = .10, 95% CI [.035, .228]) but not for higher levels (estimate = −.01, 95% CI [−.095, .056]). In support of Hypothesis 3, the effects were significantly different (index of moderated mediation = −.08, 95% CI [−.176, −.017]). Similarly, the indirect effect of word-action misalignment on task performance was significant for lower levels of internal locus of control (estimate = −.05, 95% CI [−.128, −.009]) but not for higher levels (estimate = .01, 95% CI [−.022, .053]). The effects were significantly different (index of moderated mediation = .04, 95% CI [.001, .110]) and therefore Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Results for Study 3 were consistent with the results of Studies 1 and 2 and showed that leader word-action misalignment was associated with higher shame and this relationship was stronger for lower internal locus of control such that those lower in internal locus of control felt more ashamed when their word-action misalignment was higher. Furthermore, and as expected, the conditional indirect effect of word-action misalignment on avoidance behaviour and task performance via shame was stronger when internal locus of control was lower.

DISCUSSION

Complementing the dominant follower-centric perspective on leader behavioural integrity, we adopted an actor-centric perspective to investigate how leaders respond emotionally and behaviorally to their own word-action misalignment. We examined how internal locus of control moderated the relationship between leader word-action misalignment and leader shame and how internal locus of control moderated the indirect effect of leader word-action misalignment—mediated by leader shame—on leader avoidance behaviour and leader task performance. In two experimental studies and one study with time-separated measures, we found that leader word-action misalignment was positively related to leader shame and that locus of control moderated the relationship such that the positive relationship between leader word-action misalignment and leader shame was stronger for leaders with lower internal locus of control. We also found support for the hypothesized conditional indirect effects of word-action misalignment on leader avoidance and task performance via leader shame. Word-action misalignment was associated with more leader avoidance behaviour and lower leader performance, mediated by leader shame, and this effect was stronger for leaders lower in internal locus of control.

Theoretical implications

Our study makes important theoretical contributions to behavioural integrity theory. The core theoretical question that we address is how leaders respond to their perceptions of their own word-action misalignment. Existing work on leader behavioural integrity has focused entirely on employees' perceptions of this phenomenon without considering how leaders themselves experience their own word-action misalignment (Simons et al., 2022). Due to their role in organizations, leaders need to engage with and support their employees (Byrne et al., 2014; Hoch et al., 2018; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Thus, understanding how leaders respond to their own word-action misalignment is particularly valuable for the development of behavioural integrity theory. We complemented the dominant follower-centric perspective with an actor-centric perspective to assess how leaders respond emotionally and behaviourally to their experience of misalignment between their words and actions.

Recognizing that word-action misalignment would typically be considered as falling short of widely accepted moral standards, and integrating insights from research on moral emotions, we proposed and found that leader word-action misalignment is positively related to leader shame, which has downstream consequences in affecting leader avoidance behaviour and performance. Moreover, the moral emotions perspective allowed us to establish that these (indirect) effects manifest more strongly for leaders with lower internal locus of control, presumably because a lower sense of control over one's actions invites seeing them as expressions of one's shortcomings (cf. Kim et al., 2011; Stuewig & Tangney, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2006). This contributes to behavioural integrity research not only by complementing the follower-centric perspective with a leader-centric perspective, but also by responding to the call for more research examining how moderators strengthen or weaken the effect of leader word-action misalignment (Simons et al., 2022).

Our leader-centric focus is primarily a contribution to behavioural integrity theory, and more indirectly a contribution to the broader study of leadership. Recently, leadership research has more generally recognized the need for research complementing the dominant focus on leadership effects on followers with perspectives on leadership effects on leaders (Inceoglu et al., 2018). These studies have also recognized that leadership can have emotional implications for leaders—leaders are psychologically affected by their subjective experience of their leadership (Chan et al., 2023; Lanaj et al., 2016; Lanaj & Jennings, 2020). Moral emotions evoked by one's own actions may be particularly powerful influences on subsequent behaviour (Greenbaum et al., 2020) and the present focus on shame—a moral emotion (Tangney et al., 2007)—may inspire leadership research beyond behavioural integrity. Other leadership behaviours than word-action misalignment arguably violate accepted moral principles, such as abusive

supervision (Greenbaum et al., 2013, 2015). The support for our research model thus also gives rise to the question of whether our theorizing may extend to other morally tainted leadership behaviours. While this is a question for future research, these considerations do illustrate that our analysis may have value beyond the current focus on behavioural integrity.

Managerial implications

Our findings also have practical implications for organizations and leaders. First, across our studies, we consistently find that leaders avoid their employees and do not perform as well when they feel ashamed due to inconsistency between their words and actions. This contradicts the requirements of the leader role, as leaders need to interact with and support their employees to ensure that employees perform and group objectives are met (Hoch et al., 2018; Liden et al., 2006). As such, leaders face a tension between what their job requires them to do and how they actually respond to feelings of shame when not honouring their words. They need to engage with employees, perform their tasks, and support their employees, but their shame hinders them from doing so.

Second, as organizational representatives, leaders must implement organizational strategies and plans, which may require leaders to adjust their own actions from time to time (Lambert et al., 2012; Zhang & Chen, 2013). Thus, leaders may not always be able to do what they have promised their employees when powerful others in the organization set the agenda (Way et al., 2018). When leaders feel they lack control of events, they feel helpless and powerless with no remedies to solve the situation, making them feel paralysed (Liden et al., 2000; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). Across our studies, we find that leaders feel more ashamed when they experience that they show word-action misalignment and they believe that they lack control. We find that these detrimental effects of word-action inconsistency via shame on leader avoidance and task performance are amplified when leaders believe they lack control. Such evidence suggests more practical implications for organizations.

Third, while organizations cannot change leader traits such as internal locus of control, organizations may influence—through job design, empowerment, etc. (Ng et al., 2006)—how much leaders experience that they are in control of their own actions. Instilling such a sense of control in leaders, the present findings suggest that organizations may prevent negative downstream effects and help leaders respond in more constructive ways when they are unable to keep their promises or unable to act in accordance with their espoused values. This is not to say that leaders should have *carte blanche* for word-action misalignment, but rather to recognize that the reality of organizations, and organizational hierarchy, is that leaders are not always able to make good on what they espoused earlier—and that no one benefits from dysfunctional leader responses to such behaviour.

Limitations and future research

Our findings should be considered in light of some limitations. While replication of findings across different methods goes a long way in addressing concerns with any specific method (i.e., any attribute specific to one research design cannot explain replication across methods), we should recognize that stand-alone each study has its limitations.

In Study 1, although we successfully detected the hypothesized moderated mediation, our a priori power analysis and sensitivity checks indicated that power fell below .80 for detecting smaller conditional indirect effects at certain moderator values (i.e., higher levels of the moderator). Thus, while our significant findings are unlikely to represent false positives (Type I errors), their magnitudes may be inflated, and some weaker conditional effects could have been missed due to limited statistical power (increased risk of false negatives; Giner-Sorolla et al., 2024). Future research could employ larger samples to more accurately estimate such effects.

A second limitation to note is that only Study 2 provides unambiguous causal evidence in that the experimental manipulation in Study 1 cannot exclude the possibility that it is confounded with other characteristics of the critical incident that participants recall, and Study 3 is correlational.

Third, only Study 3 relies on the actual experience of word-action misalignment in the present, as Study 1 concerns recall of past events and Study 2 concerns an imagined situation. The fact that we find support for our research model across three different ways of tapping into the experience of word-action misalignment suggests this was not a substantive influence on our findings, but it is worth emphasizing that these studies gain their value through their *combination* and associated replication tests and should not be seen as "role models" for future research stand-alone.

Fourth, while except for experimental manipulations, we relied on self-report data for variables, future research ideally would use other-source data for behavioural outcomes (e.g., follower, peer, or supervisor ratings) to alleviate concerns about common method variance, especially for the mediator to dependent variables paths.

Finally, our focus on leader internal locus of control as a moderating influence is in no way to imply that this would be the only relevant moderator. We recognize that the relationship between word-action misalignment and shame may depend on additional moderators, which could be studied in future research. For example, individuals who are more prone to feeling shame (Cohen et al., 2011) or have a strong moral identity (Daniels & Robinson, 2019) may be more likely to experience shame when they demonstrate word-action misalignment.

Less of a limitation than an observation that may inspire future research is the finding that internal locus of control was negatively related to word-action misalignment in Study 3 (the most informative study in this respect, because word-action misalignment was not experimentally varied). This may indicate that leaders with higher internal locus of control may be better able to prevent word-action misalignment. It may also mean, however, that their internal locus of control leads them to *perceive* their actions as more aligned with their words. The difference between these two interpretations—that may both hold to some extent—is that follower perceptions of leader word-action misalignment would be expected to agree more strongly with leaders' perceptions in the former case than in the latter. This is not something the present data can speak to, but an interesting and important direction for future research.

CONCLUSION

While extant research on leader word-action misalignment has focused entirely on employees' perceptions of this phenomenon, no work before our research has considered how leaders themselves experience their own word-action misalignment. By taking an actor-centric perspective, we recognize the need for understanding leaders' experiences of the word-action misalignment phenomenon. Our research offers new insights into how leaders respond emotionally and behaviorally to their own word-action misalignment and how internal locus of control plays an important moderating role on the leader word-action misalignment and shame relationship affecting leader avoidance behaviour and task performance.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Anders Friis Marstand: Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; validation; visualization; formal analysis; project administration; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft. **Daan van Knippenberg:** Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Ilias Kapoutsis:** Formal analysis; writing – review and editing; investigation; conceptualization; methodology. **Olga Epitropaki:** Conceptualization. **Ziya Ete:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Jeremy Dawson:** Formal analysis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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