

**Holding People Responsible for
Ethical Violations:
The Surprising Benefits of Accusing Others**

Jessica A. Kennedy^{a*}

^aVanderbilt University

Owen Graduate School of Management

401 21st Avenue S.

Nashville, TN 37203

(415) 640-5404

jessica.kennedy@owen.vanderbilt.edu

Maurice E. Schweitzer^b

^bUniversity of Pennsylvania

The Wharton School

3730 Walnut St.

Philadelphia, PA 19104

(215) 898-4776

schweitz@wharton.upenn.edu

* Please direct correspondence to Jessica Kennedy at the contact information listed above.

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Individuals who accuse others of unethical behavior can derive significant benefits. Compared to individuals who do not make accusations, accusers engender greater trust and are perceived to have higher ethical standards. In Study 1, accusations increased trust in the accuser and lowered trust in the target. In Study 2, we find that accusations elevate trust in the accuser by boosting perceptions of the accuser's ethical standards. In Study 3, we find that accusations boosted both attitudinal and behavioral trust in the accuser, decreased trust in the target, and promoted relationship conflict within the group. In Study 4, we examine the moderating role of moral hypocrisy. Compared to individuals who did not make an accusation, individuals who made an accusation were trusted more if they had acted ethically but not if they had acted unethically. Taken together, we find that accusations have significant interpersonal consequences. In addition to harming accused targets, accusations can substantially benefit accusers.

Keywords: Ethics; Ethical Violations; Accusations

Leaders and co-workers play a crucial role in establishing ethical norms in organizations (Flynn & Wiltermuth, 2010; Pillutla, 2011; Smith-Crowe, Tenbrunsel, Chan-Serafin, Brief, Umphress, & Joseph, 2014; Thau, Derfler-Rozin, Pitesa, Mitchell, & Pillutla, 2015; Wiltermuth, Bennett, & Pierce, 2013). In addition to articulating formal rules and modeling ethical behavior (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Mayer, Nurmohamed, Trevino, Shapiro, & Schminke, 2013; Gino, Gu, & Zhong, 2009; Weber & Murnighan, 2008), one way leaders and coworkers can communicate ethical norms is by accusing others of ethical violations.

Although accusations have been largely ignored by management scholars, accusations may be prevalent within organizations. Investigative reports have documented coworkers accusing others of falsifying hours, undermining another person's reputation, cheating in a sales contest, and covering up low quality work (Cohen, 2006; Lucas, 2011). In this investigation, we break new ground by considering how accusations convey information about the accused *and the accuser*. Accusations may profoundly influence interpersonal perceptions, and we consider how accusations may be used strategically within organizations. As one corporate executive explained, "You can put the damper on anyone...very easily... There's not enough objective information about people. When you really want to do somebody in, you just say, well, he can't get along with people...he can't manage" (Jackall, 1988, p. 65).

Across four studies, we investigate the consequences of making an accusation. We consider how accusations influence observers' perceptions of the accused, the accuser, and group conflict. We devote particular attention to the benefits of making an accusation for the accuser. In our investigation, we focus on the relationship between accusations and a construct that has particular relevance for organizations: trust (Crossley, Cooper, & Wernsing, 2013; Lount, Zhong, Sivanathan, & Murnighan, 2008; Pillutla, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2003). Trust is essential for

effective collaboration, effective leadership, and efficient organizational functioning (Bhattacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998; Golembiewski & McConkie, 1975; Lount, 2010; Lount & Pettit, 2012; Lount et al., 2008; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011; Malhotra, 2004; Malhotra & Murnighan, 2002), and our investigation offers new insight into how a potentially prevalent organizational behavior, making an accusation, can impact trust. According to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), individuals trust those who demonstrate high ability, benevolence, and integrity. By making an accusation, accusers send mixed signals. Accusers demonstrate high integrity by conveying that they have high ethical standards, but accusers also convey low benevolence as they harm the reputation of a target. Extant research offers surprisingly little insight into how trust forms when signals about ability, benevolence, and integrity diverge. In this research, we investigate observers' perceptions of accusers and offer insight into how trust develops following conflicting signals about an accusers' benevolence and integrity.

Accusations

Accusations have received remarkably scant attention from organizational scholars. The lone exception is an article by Bradford and Garrett (1995) that offers a model to guide corporate responses to accusations of unethical behavior. Bradford and Garrett (1995) argue that an appropriate response to an accusation — one that admits to falling short and offers a concession — may mitigate the harmful effects of an accusation on a corporation's image. In spite of the importance of accusations for both managers and organizations, no further research has explored accusations or their consequences.

The lack of organizational research investigating accusations is puzzling. Accusations are likely to be both prevalent and impactful. Norm negotiation and conflict pervade group interactions (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985; Murnighan & Conlon, 1991), individuals

frequently violate others' expectations (Lount et al., 2008), and people are quick to find fault with others (Barkan, Ayal, Gino, & Ariely, 2012).

In contrast to organizational scholars, linguistics scholars have recognized that accusations influence impressions of targets (Fillmore, 1969; Fillenbaum & Rapoport 1974; Orpin, 2005). Informed by research in linguistics, we expect accusations to play a significant role in organizations. If accusations are common and they shift interpersonal perceptions, they are likely to profoundly influence organizationally relevant constructs, such as trust.

In this paper, we introduce and define the construct of accusations. We then establish links between accusations and trust. We consider how accusations harm the target, but we focus particular attention on the interesting question of how accusations influence perceptions of the accuser.

We define an accusation as *an assertion that another party's behavior or character failed to meet a standard the party was responsible for meeting*. The failure may reflect a specific behavior or a broader character flaw. Importantly, accusations do not need to be true or even well-founded. In our studies, we investigate individual targets and individual accusers. Targets and accusers can, however, be groups and institutions as well as individuals. Irrespective of whether or not accusations involve individuals or groups, every accusation has the following three elements: an accuser, a target, and a negative claim.

Accusations are related to, but different from the constructs of insults and whistleblowing. Like accusations, insults convey a negative evaluation about a target. Accusations can be insulting, but many insults are not accusations. Whereas accusations imply that a target failed to meet a standard they were responsible for meeting, insults may reflect characteristics for

which the target is not responsible. For instance, to call someone ugly is insulting, but not an accusation, because individuals do not have a responsibility to be beautiful.

We also distinguish accusations from whistle-blowing. Whistle-blowing is “the disclosure by organizational members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4). We conceptualize whistle-blowing as a specific type of accusation.

Accusations differ from whistle-blowing in four ways. First, accusations can involve a broader range of parties. In whistle-blowing, the accuser is a former or current organizational member, and the accused person is the employer or organization. In contrast, any individual or group can level an accusation at any other individual or group. That is, the accuser need not be a former or current organizational member, and the target need not be the employer. Accusations may occur within or outside of an organizational context.

Second, the number of parties involved in whistle-blowing and accusations differ. Whistle-blowing involves at least three specific parties: the accuser, the target, and the audience. For whistle-blowing, the audience is critical. Whistle-blowers hope that by conveying their message to a specific audience, the audience will take action to change the target’s behavior. In contrast, accusations require only two parties: an accuser and an accused person. No audience is necessary, and accusers may not be seeking to gain compliance by involving an external party. Further, if an audience is party to an accusation, the audience may or may not have the ability to influence the target’s behavior.

Third, whistle-blowing is confined to a narrower set of transgressions than are accusations. Whistle-blowing aims to address illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices in an

organization. In contrast, many types of assertions can be accusations. For instance, an individual could be accused of an undesirable, but not necessarily unethical behavior, such as incompetence.

Fourth, accusations are not necessarily disclosures. Accusations are merely claims or assertions about another party. Rather than disclosing new information, an accuser may highlight facts or qualities routinely observed by others. For instance, a target may be widely viewed as dishonest. An individual who accuses the target of dishonesty may fail to disclose any new information about the target. Instead, the accuser indicates a willingness to hold the target accountable for exhibiting a familiar quality. In short, we conceptualize whistle-blowing as a specific type of accusation.

In this work, we consider how accusations may affect perceptions of both the accused person and the accuser. Accusations make norm violations salient, and draw attention to the accused person's behavior. As a result, accusations can increase accountability and serve as a tool for social control (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014; Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008). Accusers let others know they are paying attention to a target's behavior and consider the target's actions to be inappropriate.

In addition to considering the consequences of accusations for the accused, we consider consequences of accusations for the *accusers*. Impression management concerns guide many behaviors (Goffman, 1959; Pillutla & Murnighan, 1995; Tetlock, 2002; Murnighan, Oesch, & Pillutla, 2001), and accusations represent a potentially powerful impression management tool.

Types of Accusations

We consider two types of accusations. The first type involves accusations of ethical failure. Ethics-related accusations assert that a target has failed to meet an ethical standard and

violated an ethical principle. The second type of accusation involves a competence violation. Competence-related accusations assert that a target has fallen short of a performance standard. For instance, an accuser may assert that a target is a bad negotiator.

In our studies, we focus on accusations of unethical behavior. Accusations of unethical behavior are common, and prior research suggests that morality information impacts person-perception more than competence information (De Bruin & van Lange, 2000; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004).

Trust

Across our studies, we investigate the influence of accusations on trust. We define trust as the willingness to be vulnerable to another party based upon positive expectations about their behavior (Mayer et al., 1995), and we conceptualize trust as situation- and person-specific (Bhattacharya et al., 1998). We focus on trust because it is a critical aspect of social and organizational life. Trust is essential for cooperation within organizations (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001, 2002; Kramer, 1999; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011); trust improves efficiency (Granovetter, 1985) and enables managers to lead effectively (Dirks, 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Some scholars have even argued that no variable influences interpersonal and group behavior as much as trust does (Golembiewski & McConkie, 1975, p. 131).

We expect accusations to influence trust in both the accused and the accuser. For the accused, accusations are likely to harm trust, because accusations assert that the accused has failed to meet an important standard. Consequently, accusations may harm perceptions of the accused person's integrity and benevolence. According to Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of trust, integrity and benevolence are two critical antecedents of trust. In addition to influencing trust in the accused, accusations are likely to influence trust in the accuser. Accusations send mixed

messages with respect to whether or not the accuser is trustworthy. By understanding how accusations affect trust, we investigate the relative importance of integrity and benevolence to trust, an important question that, to date, has received little attention (Mayer et al., 1995: 722). In addition, we deepen our understanding of how conflicting signals influence trust.

For accusers, making an accusation demonstrates high ethical standards. Third party observers may presume that only those with high ethical standards would notice an ethical failing and take a corrective, confrontational action by making an accusation. By signaling high ethical standards, accusers project integrity. The link between perceptions of integrity and trust is well established (Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, & Dirks, 2007; Kim, Dirks, & Cooper, 2009; Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Kim et al., 2004), and consequently, accusations may build trust. However, accusations, by harming the accused person, project low benevolence. By signaling low benevolence, accusations may decrease trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Williams, 2007; Wilson, Straus, & McEvily, 2006). Taken together, it is unclear how observers might reconcile the conflicting signals of high integrity and low benevolence that accusers send. It is clear, however, that accusations of unethical behavior convey information about both the accused and the accuser that may influence trust.

Cognitive and Affective Trust in the Accuser

Though early research conceptualized trust as a unidimensional construct, a growing stream of research has disentangled affect-based trust from cognition-based trust (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Johnson-George & Swap, 1982; Lewis & Weigart, 1985; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011; McAllister, 1995; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). This distinction separates the emotional dimension of trust from the intellectual dimension of trust (Dunn, Ruedy, & Schweitzer, 2012).

Affect-based trust is rooted in an emotional bond between two parties (Mayer et al., 1995; Williams, 2007). Affective trust reflects feelings of emotional security. People instill affective trust in others who respond to them in supportive, considerate, and benevolent ways (Dunn et al., 2012). Beliefs about benevolence undergird affective trust (Dunn et al., 2012; Mayer et al., 1995).

Cognition-based trust is rooted in beliefs about the trusted party's reliability (McAllister, 1995). Characteristics such as consistency and dependability instill cognitive trust. Cognitive trust reflects beliefs about a counterpart's ability and integrity (Butler, 1991). Integrity is the extent to which an individual adheres to a set of acceptable principles (McFall, 1987), even in the face of social or emotional pressures to violate these principles (Becker, 1998).

Informed by this research (e.g., Dunn et al., 2012), we distinguish between affective and cognitive trust in our investigation. We address Dirks and Ferrin's (2002: 623) call: "more theory is needed to understand the antecedents and consequences of alternative dimensions of trust . . . future studies might include multiple dimensions (affective and cognitive) within a single study and attempt to distinguish between the processes involved."

Accusations can send different signals about the accuser's benevolence and integrity. By harming a target's reputation, accusers may signal low benevolence, which may reduce affect-based trust. At the same time, accusations may convey information about the accuser's ethical standards. By signaling high integrity, accusers may engender greater cognition-based trust. As a result, in our investigation we distinguish between affect-based and cognition-based trust. Specifically, we consider the possibility that accusations influence affect-based and cognition-based trust differently.

How accusations may harm affect-based trust. Affect-based trust is diminished by acts that reveal low benevolence (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014). Accusations highlight another person's failure and accusers act as "intuitive prosecutors" seeking to detect and punish those who violate norms (Tetlock, 2002). As a result, by making an accusation, an accuser may engender lower affective trust by decreasing perceptions of benevolence.

Existing empirical findings are consistent with this account. Although no research to our knowledge has examined interpersonal perceptions of whistle-blowers, whistle-blowers are often ostracized and suffer retaliation (Near & Miceli, 1996; Rehg, Miceli, Near, & Van Scotter, 2008). Moreover, individuals who report unethical behavior are disliked by their peers, despite being perceived as ethical (Trevino & Victor, 1992). Similarly, people who refuse on principle to take part in unethical activities are disliked by other group members (Minson & Monin, 2012; Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). This occurs because group members expect to be judged negatively by people who espouse high moral standards. Extant research investigating perceptions of ethical individuals within groups has largely focused on liking and acceptance (Reuben & Stephenson, 2013). Building on these findings, we postulate that accusers will be distrusted. Specifically, we hypothesize that accusations will negatively influence affective trust in an accuser.

Affective Trust in the Accuser (Hypothesis 1). Affective trust in a potential accuser will be lower when the person makes an accusation than when the person does not.

How accusations may elevate cognition-based trust. Although accusations signal low benevolence, they also signal high ethical standards. People with high ethical standards are perceived to have integrity, a critical determinant of cognition-based trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Mayer & Davis, 1999). Perceptions of integrity inform impression formation (De Bruin & van

Lange, 2000; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007), but integrity itself is unobservable. It must be inferred from a person's statements and behavior. By making an accusation, accusers can signal integrity and boost cognition-based trust.

Cognitive Trust in the Accuser (Hypothesis 2). Cognitive trust in a potential accuser will be higher when the person makes an accusation than when the person does not.

Ethical Standards (Hypothesis 3). Perceptions of the potential accuser's ethical standards account for the relationship between making an accusation and cognitive trust in the potential accuser.

According to our theory, making an accusation will boost cognitive trust only when accusers can plausibly signal that they hold high ethical standards. When the accuser is known to have acted unethically, accusations cannot credibly signal high ethical standards, and accusations should not increase cognitive trust.

The combination of holding high ethical standards for others and acting unethically oneself is moral hypocrisy (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997). Moral hypocrites are motivated by a desire to appear moral, without having to incur the costs of acting morally (Batson & Thompson, 2001). Interestingly, moral hypocrites frequently (and incorrectly) perceive themselves to be moral (Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). We predict that moral hypocrisy moderates the positive effect of making an accusation on cognitive trust.

The Moderating Role of Moral Hypocrisy (Hypothesis 4). Moral hypocrisy moderates the effect of making an accusation on trust, such that making an accusation elevates trust in ethical accusers but not in unethical accusers.

The Effect of Accusations on the Target and Group

Although accusations may benefit accusers, accusations are very likely to harm targets. Some accusations convey new, negative information. For instance, accusations might reveal that well-known scientists falsified their data. Other accusations draw attention to negative information that is already common knowledge. For instance, a colleague known to be dishonest could be accused of over-stating travel expenses. Accusations, even if they are unfounded, can harm targets by providing social proof that a target is untrustworthy. In cases where it is unclear whether or not a behavior is unethical and whether or not an action reflects malice, accusations may influence observers' assessments. Individuals routinely take cues from others to infer what is right or appropriate (Cialdini, 1993), and this is true even for important moral judgments (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Gino & Galinsky, 2012; Moore & Gino, 2013). As a result, when an accuser suggests that a target has failed to meet an important standard, observers may infer that the target is unreliable, has bad intentions, and is untrustworthy. Thus, we expect accusations to negatively impact cognitive and affective trust in targets.

Affective Trust in the Target (Hypothesis 5). Affective trust in a potential target of an accusation will be lower when the person is accused of unethical behavior than when the person is not accused of unethical behavior.

Cognitive Trust in the Target (Hypothesis 6). Cognitive trust in a potential target of an accusation will be lower when the person is accused of unethical behavior than when the person is not accused of unethical behavior.

We also expect accusations to harm group functioning by creating relationship conflict. Accusations reveal a conflict between the standards held by the accused and the accuser.

Specifically, an accusation communicates the accuser's disapproval of the standards an accused person holds for him- or herself. Until an accusation is made, incompatibilities in ethical standards may go unnoticed. People often overestimate the degree to which others share their views on ethical matters (Flynn & Wiltermuth, 2010). After an accusation has been made, the incompatibility in ethical standards between a target and an accuser becomes salient.

Relationship conflict reflects interpersonal incompatibilities (Jehn & Mannix, 2001) and highlighting incompatibility may negatively impact group interactions. For example, relationship conflict negatively impacts satisfaction, liking of other group members, and intent to stay in the group (Jehn, 1995).

Relationship Conflict in the Group (Hypothesis 7). People in groups with accusations will perceive greater relationship conflict than will people in groups without accusations.

We also expect accusations to reduce group identification. Group identification is the degree to which people define themselves in terms of their membership in a group (Tyler & Blader, 2003: 354). People identify with groups that both provide a sense of positive distinctiveness and lack intragroup competition (Brewer, 1991; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Accusations may diminish group identification by making the group less attractive and by creating a sense of intragroup competition.

Identification with the Group (Hypothesis 8). People in groups with accusations will identify with their group less than will people in groups without accusations.

Overview of Studies

Across a pilot study and four experiments, we investigate the influence of accusations on interpersonal perceptions. In our pilot study, we establish that accusations of unethical behavior

are common within organizations. In Study 1, we find that accusations harm perceptions of the target, but boost cognitive trust in the accuser. In Study 2, we identify perceptions of the accuser's ethical standards as a mediator of the beneficial effects of making an accusation. In Study 3, we conducted a face-to-face experiment involving groups with two confederates. Every participant observed a confederate cheat. Half of the time, the second confederate accused the cheater of acting unethically. The in-person accusations boosted trust in the accuser, but also promoted group conflict. In Study 4, we identify moral hypocrisy as a moderator of the relationship between accusations and perceptions of the accuser.

Our research breaks new ground in three ways. First, we introduce and define an important, but understudied construct: accusations. By doing so, our work builds a foundation for future research to study accusations, a pervasive and consequential phenomenon in organizations. Second, our research documents how accusations influence interpersonal perceptions. Our findings reveal that accusations can benefit accusers at the expense of targets and groups. And third, our research identifies an effective approach for communicating integrity—an important but unobservable personal attribute. Accusations signal integrity, and represent an effective—but costly—tool to manage impressions.

To examine accusations, we use laboratory experiments. We endorse a “full-cycle research” approach that employs both field and laboratory settings (Chatman & Flynn, 2005), but for several reasons we chose to use laboratory methods for our initial investigation of accusations. First, many accusations in the field occur spontaneously and privately and are difficult to observe. Second, in natural settings a number of contextual factors are likely to covary with the nature of the accusation. For example, accusations may become more likely (and more public) when ethical violations are severe, when accusers have grown disaffected with their

organization, and when accusers have more power than the target. Third, accusations in the field may address a wide range of violations, and reflect either material or subjective shortcomings. This makes the systematic study of accusations far more challenging in the field. By using laboratory-based experiments, we gain experimental control to isolate the direct effects of accusations. Across our studies, we hold many factors constant, such as the severity of the ethical violation and the identity of the accuser. This enables us to directly test our hypotheses. To build the initial foundation for understanding observers' reactions to accusations, our methods are best. In the General Discussion, we consider how future research can advance our understanding of accusations in naturalistic field settings.

Pilot Study

We began our investigation with a pilot study to investigate the prevalence and nature of accusations in organizations.

Method

We recruited 100 participants in a train station located in the Northeastern United States. Most participants (91%) were currently employed and 54% were female. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 75 years ($M = 38.23$, $SD = 15.33$).

We asked participants to recall and describe an accusation they heard at work. We also asked participants to report how easy it was to recall an accusation, using a scale from 1 (*very difficult*) to 7 (*very easy*), and indicate how long ago the accusation occurred. Three independent coders read each essay and rated whether or not the accusation concerned ethics ($ICC = .75$), coding it "1" if so and "0" otherwise.

Results

Ninety-five percent of participants recalled an accusation. Most of the accusations concerned ethics; the three coders found that 66% involved ethics, on average (min = 55%, max = 70%). Examples of accusations concerning ethics included, “A superior was accused of making a sexual request to subordinate,” “A manager was accused of using education level as a justification to cover favoritism,” and “I was accused of being dishonest. My boss told me I was trying to make her look bad.”

We excluded accusations of incompetence and laziness from our set of ethics accusations. Though sloth may violate an ethical norm in some cases, we excluded these cases to use a conservative approach to assess the frequency of accusations about ethics in organizations. For example, we coded the following accusation as not related to ethics: “My coworker was accused of laziness.”

Participants also reported how easy it was to recall an accusation using a scale from 1 (very difficult) to 7 (very easy). Nearly half (45%) of participants found it slightly to very easy to recall an accusation. Sixteen percent said it was “slightly easy,” 18% said it was “easy,” and 10% said it was “very easy.” Accusations concerning ethics were as easy to recall as other accusations, $F(1, 96) = 0.00, p = .95, \eta_p^2 < .001$. Forty-one percent of accusations occurred within the last month and 78% occurred within the prior year.

Discussion

These data reveal that accusations about ethics are common in organizations. In the following four experiments, we manipulate the use of accusations of unethical behavior and we investigate how accusations influence perceptions.

Study 1

In Study 1, we explore the interpersonal effects of making an accusation. We focus on perceptions of affective and cognitive trust, and we explore how accusations influence perceptions of both the accuser (Hypotheses 1 and 2) and the accused target (Hypotheses 5 and 6).

Method

Participants. We recruited 148 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Eleven participants (7%) failed our attention check, and we excluded them from further analysis. We report results from 137 participants (46% women) with a mean age of 31.8 years ($SD = 11.0$). Our results are virtually identical when we include all participants.

Design and procedure. We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions (Accusation v. Control). In both conditions, participants read the following background information about a business problem:

Chemical Co. is losing money and now faces an additional hurdle – the United States government has recently issued a law against using the chemical (“Adhesive 100”) in their best-selling furniture glue. The law against using Adhesive 100 takes effect in 6 months. Chemical Co. cannot make the furniture glue without this chemical because the glue will lose much of its adhesive quality. Chemical Co.’s CEO has hired a consultant to design a strategy to restore the company to profitability. Revenue growth is also a key objective. The CEO knows of at least three solutions: (1) Use an alternative chemical, “Adhesive 200.” Adhesive 200 is very effective as an adhesive, but it is more expensive than other adhesives. (2) Use an alternative chemical, “Adhesive 300.” Adhesive 300 is effective and priced similarly to Adhesive 100, but it is harmful to the workers who

produce the furniture glue. (3) Hire a lobbyist to promote the company's interests. The CEO is not very happy with these options, so the consultant is free to suggest alternatives. In other words, the consultant can choose from these options or invent new options.

After reading this background information, we told participants that they would see two videos that prior participants had made when presenting their solutions for Chemical Co.'s business problem. In reality, the videos were of two trained confederates. The videos are available from the authors upon request.

In each video, the presenters summarized Chemical Co.'s business problems and suggested solutions. In the first part of the video, the first presenter delivered his presentation and suggested acquiring competitors, investing in research and development, refinancing company debt, and using Adhesive 200. At the end of his presentation, the second presenter was given the opportunity to ask questions or comment. In both conditions, the second presenter declined to make any comments or ask any question. Then, after the first presenter finished, the second presenter (the target in this study) delivered his presentation. He recommended hiring a lobbyist, advertising the existing glue product heavily while it was still legal, and selling Adhesive 100 in developing countries with weaker environmental regulations. After completing his presentation, the first presenter (the accuser in this study) had an opportunity to ask questions or to comment on the presentation. In the Accusation condition, the first presenter said, "Your solutions to the problem are unethical." In the Control condition, the first presenter had no questions or comments.

After watching the videos, participants completed a survey that measured their trust in both the first presenter (accuser) and the second presenter (target).

Trust. We measured cognitive trust and affective trust using the items from Dunn et al. (2012). Participants indicated their agreement with each item using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Cognitive trust. We used four items to measure cognitive trust. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed that they would rely on this person to follow through on commitments, assume this person's work was done properly if they needed to use it, be comfortable having the person in a critical role on their team, and feel uneasy if they needed to depend on the person's abilities (reverse-scored). The scales were reliable for both the accuser ($\alpha = .87$) and the target ($\alpha = .89$).

Affective trust. We used four items to measure affective trust. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed that they would share their most outlandish ideas and hopes with the person, talk with this person about difficulties they were having at school or work, be willing to admit their worst mistakes to this person, and rely on this person for support when they needed it. Again, the scales were reliable for both the accuser ($\alpha = .85$) and the target ($\alpha = .86$).

Results

Trust in the accuser. We first examined how making an accusation affected trust in the accuser. Supporting the cognitive-trust-in-the-accuser hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), the accusation *increased* cognitive trust in the accuser. For the accuser, cognitive trust was higher in the accusation condition ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.04$) than it was in the control condition ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.04$), $t(135) = 2.04$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.35$. The accusation did not significantly impact affective trust in the accuser, $t(135) = 1.32$, $p = .19$, $d = 0.22$. Thus, we did not find support for the affective-trust-in-the-accuser hypothesis (Hypothesis 1). We depict these results in Figure 1.

Trust in the target. We next examined how the accusation influenced trust in the accused person. Compared to the control condition, the accusation reduced cognitive trust in the target, ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.20$ v. $M = 4.05, SD = 1.22$), $t(135) = -3.72, p < .001, d = 0.64$; this finding is consistent with the cognitive-trust-in-the-target hypothesis (Hypothesis 6). The accusation did not significantly impact affective trust in the target, $t(135) = -0.01, p = .99, d = 0.00$, providing no support for the affective-trust-in-the-target hypothesis (Hypothesis 5).

Discussion

Although accusations harm the accused, accusations can benefit the accuser. Participants in our experiment observed the same presentations in both conditions. Half of the time, the first presenter accused the second presenter (the target) of engaging in unethical behavior. These accusations curtailed cognitive trust in the target, but boosted cognitive trust in the accuser. For both the accuser and the accused, accusations influenced cognitive trust.

In this study, participants watched confederates make presentations and either heard or did not hear an accusation. The accusation in this study was well-founded, and our protocol afforded high control over the stimuli to link accusations and cognitive-trust.

Study 2

In Study 2, we extend our investigation in three ways. First, we explore the underlying mechanism that links accusations with cognitive trust. Specifically, in addition to investigating trust in the accuser (Hypotheses 1 and 2) and the target (Hypotheses 5 and 6), we test the hypothesis that making an accusation signals high ethical standards (Hypothesis 3). Second, we explore the influence of accusations when the observed actions are ethically ambiguous. In this study, we consider an ethically ambiguous relationship between a business person and a government official. Third, we extend our investigation to a different population.

Method

Participants. We recruited 152 participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Some participants ($n = 13$) failed attention check questions and were thus excluded from further analyses, although our results did not materially change when we included these participants. The remaining sample of 139 people (78 men) were on average 31.4 years old ($SD = 10.4$).

Design and procedure. In this study, we employed a 2 (Accusation v. Control) x 2 (Order), between-participants design. In all four conditions, participants read the following scenario:

Jamie is Vice President of Operations for a large company. The company developed plans to open a new manufacturing plant in Vietnam, and Jamie relocated to Vietnam to oversee the opening of the new facility. It is critical for the company that the facility opens on schedule. Delays could harm the company's profit and market share. Shortly after arriving, Jamie met with a local government official who played a key role in convincing Jamie's company to open in their current location. This official also oversees the final inspection process that will allow the company to start production. The manufacturing facility is about to undergo the final inspection for safety. Jamie is concerned about passing inspection. In advance of the inspection, Jamie had a routine meeting with the local government official. At the meeting, Jamie gave the official an expensive (\$300) watch like his own, which the official had admired during a former meeting.

After reading this scenario, participants in both conditions read that Jamie, during a trip home, told an old friend Rob, about the situation and the gift. In the Control condition, participants read, "Rob is a mid-level manager at a local company. He has worked there for 7

years. In his free time, he enjoys jogging, reading, and listening to music.” In the Accusation condition, they read the same text before reading one additional line: “Rob told Jamie, ‘Giving that gift was unethical.’”

Finally, participants reported their trust in Rob (the accuser) and their perceptions of his ethical standards. We counterbalanced the order in which we presented these two scales, and participants responded to all items using scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Trust. As in Study 1, we measured trust with items from Dunn et al. (2012) to measure cognitive and affective trust.

Cognitive trust. To assess cognitive trust, participants rated the extent to which they agreed that they would rely on Rob to follow through on commitments, assume Rob’s work was done properly if they needed to use it, be comfortable having Rob in a critical role on their team, and feel uneasy if they needed to depend on Rob’s abilities (reverse-scored), $\alpha = .90$.

Affective trust. To report their affective trust in the accuser, participants rated the extent to which they would share their most outlandish ideas and hopes with Rob, talk with Rob about difficulties they were having at school, be willing to admit their worst mistakes to Rob, and rely on this person for support when they needed it, $\alpha = .88$.

Ethical standards. To assess perceptions of the accuser’s ethical standards, participants responded to four items. They rated the extent to which Rob took ethics seriously, had high moral standards, had strong values, and had higher moral standards than most other people, $\alpha = .95$.

Results

We first conducted analyses controlling for the order in which the ethical standards and trust measures appeared. We found no main or interaction effects for order of presentation ($ps >$

.20), so we collapsed our data across this variable for our remaining analyses. In Table 1, we report the descriptive statistics and correlations.

Cognitive trust. Supporting the cognitive-trust-in-the-accuser hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), making an accusation increased cognitive trust in the accuser. Participants reported greater trust in the accuser when he made an accusation ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.06$) than when he did not ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.96$), $t(137) = 3.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.67$.

Affective trust. The accusation did not influence affective trust, $t(137) = 1.33$, $p = .19$, $d = 0.23$; we do not find support for the affective-trust-in-the-accuser hypothesis (Hypothesis 1). We depict these results in Figure 2.

Perceived ethical standards. We next examined the influence of accusations on perceptions of the accuser's ethical standards. As expected, the accuser was rated to have higher ethical standards when he made an accusation ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.31$) than when he did not ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(137) = 7.60$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.29$.

Mediation analysis. We then examined the role of perceptions of the accuser's ethical standards in mediating the relationship between accusations and cognitive trust, the ethical-standards-mediation hypothesis (Hypothesis 3). We test this hypothesis in two ways. First, we used the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach. In separate linear regression analyses, a dummy variable for the accusation predicted greater cognitive trust, $b^* = .32$, $t(137) = 3.92$, $p < .001$, and more positive perceptions of the accuser's ethical standards, $b^* = .54$, $t(137) = 7.60$, $p < .001$. When the variable for perceptions of the accuser's ethical standards was entered into the analysis, the accusation no longer affected cognitive trust at a statistically significant level, $b^* = -.04$, $t(136) = -0.50$, $p = .62$. The Sobel (1982) test showed evidence of significant mediation (Sobel test statistic = 5.60, $p < .001$).

Second, we used Preacher & Hayes (2008) bootstrapping method to test for mediation. With 5,000 samples with replacement, the method yielded a 95% confidence interval of [0.48, 1.06] for the indirect effect. Because the interval excluded zero, this analysis provides evidence of significant mediation. Both analyses support the ethical-standards-mediation hypothesis (Hypothesis 3), and we illustrate these mediation analyses in Figure 3.

Discussion

As in Study 1, we find that making an accusation increased cognitive trust in the accuser. In this study, we considered a different accusation context and we employed a different sample population.

In this study, we also explore the underlying mechanism that links accusations with cognitive trust. We find that accusations influence perceptions of the accuser's ethical standards, and that perceptions of ethical standards mediate the relationship between accusations and cognitive trust in the accuser.

As in Study 1, we did not find that accusations significantly influenced affective trust. Participants did not feel a significantly stronger or weaker emotional bond to the accuser after he made an accusation. Instead, they found him to be more reliable.

Our first two studies establish the relation between accusations and trust in controlled settings. One limitation of Studies 1 and 2 is that our participants were not part of the social setting in which the accusation occurred. If accusations create perceptions of conflict in the group, implicate observers in wrongdoing, or threaten observers' monetary interests, it is possible that accusations may have different effects on trust than those we observe in Studies 1 and 2. To address this limitation and to measure trust behavior, we conducted Study 3.

Study 3

In Study 3, we examine the effects of accusations in groups, with real unethical behavior. To do so, we trained confederates. In each experimental session, one confederate served as a potential accuser and a second confederate served as the target. After completing a task, the target misreported the group's performance to the experimenter. By misreporting the group's performance, the target increased the monetary payoffs for each person in the group. This aspect of our design affords a conservative test of the potential benefits of making an accusation (Hypotheses 1, 2, 5, and 6). In this setting, group members had self-interested reasons to prefer that nobody make an accusation. In fact, *none* of our participants corrected the target's over-statement, confronted the target, or reported the over-statement to the experimenter. That is, every participant in our study was complicit in the misrepresentation.

In addition to measuring attitudinal trust as we did in Studies 1 and 2, we measured behavioral trust by having participants make trust game decisions.

In this study, we also investigate the impact of making an accusation on two dimensions of group functioning: relationship conflict and group identification. We use these measures to test Hypotheses 7 and 8.

Method

Participants. We recruited 118 students at a Northeastern university to participate in a study in exchange for \$10 an hour, plus the opportunity to earn additional money. Women comprised 61% of the sample. Participants were 43% Asian, 26% Caucasian, 14% African American, 7% Latino/Hispanic, 3% Middle Eastern, and 6% who reported "other" ethnicities. Two percent of participants did not provide demographic data. On average, our participants were 20.0 years old ($SD = 2.1$). Nineteen participants (16%) indicated suspicion concerning the

confederates or accusation and were excluded from our analyses, leaving a sample of 99 participants. Our results are virtually identical when we include suspicious participants in our analyses.

Design and procedure. We employed a two-condition (Accusation v. Control), between-participants design. In this study, participants reported to the laboratory two at a time for a 30-minute study of groups. Upon arriving, they met two confederates who were ostensibly other participants. We trained eight male confederates to play the role of either the target (who cheated) or the accuser. These confederates participated in the 59 sessions of our experiment. In training sessions, our confederates practiced following a script to ensure consistent behavior across sessions.

The study had three parts: introductions, a problem-solving exercise, and an investment task. Prior to the introductions, the experimenter provided the group with instructions, set a timer for the problem-solving task, and then left the room. Then, introductions began. Group members stated their first name, the letter labeling their seat at the table, their favorite color, one of their hobbies, their favorite food, childhood pet, and the place they would most like to visit on a road-trip. The two confederates always provided the same, pre-scripted information.

Following the introductions, the group engaged in a problem-solving task (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). The problem solving task involved finding two three-digit numbers that sum to ten in each of 20 matrices. Participants had three minutes to solve as many matrices as possible. Each person completed the task individually, and the group received a \$0.10 bonus for each matrix solved by a group member. For instance, if each of the four group members solved 5 matrices, each member of the group would earn a \$2.00 bonus (4 people x 5 matrices x \$0.10).

The confederate in the cheater role always solved 6 matrices and the confederate in the accuser role always solved 5 matrices.

When the timer indicated three minutes had passed, the cheating confederate followed the experimenter's initial instructions to open an envelope with the answer key and score everyone's problem solving task. Then, the cheater said, "Here is how many each of us got right: I got 6, B got [real number], C got 5, D got [real number]." A few moments later, the experimenter returned to the room and asked how many problems each group member had solved. The cheater replied by over-reporting everyone's performance by adding two to the correct numbers he had just stated to the group. Specifically, he said, "I got 8, B got [real+2], C got 7, D got [real+2]." The experimenter acknowledged the total score that the cheater reported, stated the bonus amount that would be added to each of their payments, and then left the room to arrange the bonus payment.

After the experimenter left the room, the accuser either leveled an accusation or remained silent. In the accusation condition, the accuser said to the cheating confederate, "You know those amounts were too high. That's pretty unethical." In the control condition, the accuser said nothing.

Finally, the experimenter re-entered the room and instructed the group to complete an "investment task" via computer. In this stage of the experiment, participants provided a behavioral measure of trust via the investment task. Then, participants completed a survey measuring their perceptions of others in the group. They rated other group members by seat letter. At the end of the study, we paid and debriefed the participants.

Measures. Our dependent variables included perceptions of the accuser and the target. The naturalistic group environment also allowed us to measure group-level outcomes.

Trust (behavioral). To provide a behavioral measure of trust, participants completed the Trust Game (Berg, Dickhaut, & McCabe, 1995; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). In the experiment, we called this an investment task. Participants first reported their seat letter. Then, they read the following text:

In this task, 2 people are randomly assigned to be Transfer-ers and 2 people are randomly assigned to be Receivers. You are a Transfer-er. As a Transfer-er, you have the opportunity to invest up to \$3 of your payment for participating in this experiment by transferring all or part of this \$3 to one or two other participants in this study ("the Receivers"). If you decide to transfer any money, then the experimenter will double the transferred amount. Then, the participant who received your transfer will decide how much (if any) of the amount to transfer back to you. You may transfer any part of your \$3 to one or both of the Receivers. The Receivers are: Person A, Person C.

In our experiment, the two participants were always Transfer-ers and the two confederates were always the Receivers. As Transfer-ers, participants had the option of passing any amount between \$0 and \$3 total to the two confederates. To ensure comprehension, participants responded to two comprehension check questions before proceeding. The amount of money participants passed to each confederate served as our behavioral measure of trust.

Cognitive trust. Participants reported their cognitive trust using the same four items (Dunn et al., 2012) we used in Studies 1 and 2. They responded using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The scale was reliable for judgments of both the accuser ($\alpha = .89$) and the target ($\alpha = .89$).

Affective trust. Participants also reported their affective trust using the same four items we used in Studies 1 and 2. Reliability was high for both the accuser ($\alpha = .92$) and the target ($\alpha = .88$).

Relationship conflict. After rating other individuals in the group, participants reported their perceptions of relationship conflict in the group using four items ($\alpha = .94$) from Jehn (1995). Participants indicated how much friction, tension, and emotional conflict there was among their group members and how much personality conflicts were evident in their group, using a scale from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*a lot*).

Group identification. Participants also reported their level of identification with the group using three items ($\alpha = .92$) from Willer (2009). They rated how much they identified with the group, felt connected to the group, and valued being a member of the group, using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Results

We report descriptive statistics and correlations in Table 2.

Accuser perceptions. We first examined our key hypothesis that making an accusation increases trust in an accuser.

Trust (behavioral). The accusation significantly influenced behavioral trust in the accuser. Participants transferred significantly more money to the accuser in the Trust Game following an accusation ($M = \$1.51$, $SD = 0.89$) than they did in the control condition ($M = \$1.19$, $SD = 0.67$), $t(96) = 2.04$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.41$. We depict this result in Figure 4.

Cognitive trust. We also find a significant effect of the accusation on cognitive trust. When the accuser made an accusation ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 0.98$), participants reported more cognitive trust in the accuser than they did in the control condition ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.03$), $t(95)$

= 2.87, $p = .01$, $d = 0.59$. This provides further support for the cognitive-trust-in-the-accuser hypothesis (Hypothesis 2). We illustrate this result in Figure 5.

Affective trust. The accusation did not significantly impact affective trust in the accuser, $t(95) = 1.25$, $p = .22$, $d = 0.25$. As in Studies 1 and 2, we do not find support for the affective-trust-in-the-accuser hypothesis (Hypothesis 1).

Target perceptions. We next examined how being the target of an accusation affected trust. Recall that in this experiment the target of the accusation cheated by over-stating the group's performance.

Trust (behavioral). The accusation did not significantly influence our behavioral measure of trust in the target. Participants passed similar amounts to the target in both conditions, $t(97) = -0.67$, $p = .50$, $d = 0.25$.

Cognitive trust. The accusation significantly reduced cognitive trust in the target. When the cheater was accused ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.15$), participants reported less cognitive trust in him than they did in the control condition ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.52$), $t(96) = -2.07$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.42$, supporting the cognitive-trust-in-the-target hypothesis (Hypothesis 6).

Affective trust. The accusation marginally reduced affective trust in the target. When the target was accused ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.26$), participants reported less affective trust in him than they did in the control condition ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.35$), $t(96) = -1.95$, $p = .05$, $d = 0.40$. This provides some support for the affective-trust-in-the-target hypothesis (Hypothesis 5).

Group-level outcomes. Finally, we examined how the accusation changed perceptions of group functioning. We explored two dimensions of group-functioning: relationship conflict and identification. We expected that an accusation, despite benefiting the accusers, would damage group functioning by heightening relationship conflict and reducing identification.

Relationship conflict. Supporting the relationship-conflict-in-the-group hypothesis (Hypothesis 7), the accusation increased perceptions of relationship conflict. Participants perceived more relationship conflict in the group following an accusation ($M = 2.61, SD = 1.00$) than they did in the control condition ($M = 1.33, SD = 0.62$), $t(95) = 7.71, p < .001, d = 1.54$.

Group identification. The accusation had a marginally significant effect on group identification. Following an accusation ($M = 2.94, SD = 1.22$), participants identified less with the group than they did when an accusation was not present ($M = 3.41, SD = 1.33$), $t(95) = -1.80, p = .08, d = 0.37$. This provides some support for the identification-with-the-group hypothesis (Hypothesis 8).

Discussion

In Study 3, we extend our investigation of accusations to a group setting and we include a behavioral measure of trust. Replicating our findings in Studies 1 and 2, we find that the confederate increased cognitive trust by making an accusation. We also find that making an accusation boosted behavioral trust in the accuser.

Notably, we document benefits to accusers of making an accusation even though our design affords a conservative test of this relationship in three ways. First, the target's unethical behavior helped the group. By over-reporting the group members' performance on the task, the target helped every group member gain a greater monetary reward. Second, the cheating was transparent. In our study, the unethical act was obvious and clear to the participants. Third, accusers demonstrated an ethical standard that was higher than the standard held by others in the group. All of our participants were complicit in the cheating; none intervened or accused the cheater of acting unethically.

As in Studies 1 and 2, the accusation did not substantially impact affective trust in the accuser. This is interesting given the aggressive and public nature of accusations. Although accusations might indicate a lack of benevolence toward the target, observers did not rate the accuser significantly lower in affective trust.

We did find that the accusation impacted trust in the target. Although the target acted identically across conditions, participants trusted him *less* when he was accused. This effect emerged in survey measures of both cognitive and affective trust. The amount participants passed to the target, however, was not significantly different across conditions. The trust game is a coarse measure of trust in general, and perhaps particularly so in our design; participants split their endowment between the two confederates and themselves.

Taken together, our findings are consistent with our cognitive trust finding in Study 1, but the impact on affective trust in this study differed from our findings in Study 1, where we found no evidence that the accusation impacted affective trust of the target. One potential explanation for this difference is that the target in this study is clearly guilty of the violation. The accusation does not convey new information or clarify an ambiguous situation. In Study 1, for example, the target's guilt is less clear and the evaluation of his proposal is more subjective.

Our face-to-face group interaction enabled us to examine group-level outcomes. We find that the accusation harmed group functioning. Specifically, we find that the accusation triggered relationship conflict, which can decrease satisfaction and reduce group performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), and it decreased group identification, which can curtail individual contributions to the group (Blader & Tyler, 2009; Willer, 2009).

Consistent with our findings in Studies 1 and 2, in this study we again find that making an accusation increases cognitive trust in the accuser. This increase in trust was evidenced in

both our attitudinal and our behavioral measures of trust. That is, the accuser benefits from making an accusation. However, although the accuser was trusted more following the accusation, people perceived greater relationship conflict in the group and identified somewhat less with the group following an accusation.

Study 4

In Study 4, we investigate moral hypocrisy as a moderator of the relationship between accusations and trust. In Studies 1, 2, and 3, accusers increased cognitive trust by making an accusation. We postulate that an unethical accuser cannot credibly signal high ethical standards. Consequently, we expect that individuals who act unethically will not be able to gain cognitive trust by making an accusation. In Study 4, we test this prediction by manipulating the ethical behavior of an accuser. We expect an accusation to increase trust when the accuser acts ethically (acts in a manner consistent with the accusation), but not when the accuser acts unethically (acts hypocritically). This study tests Hypothesis 4 and provides an additional test of our hypotheses concerning trust in the accuser (Hypotheses 1, 2) and the target (Hypotheses 5 and 6).

Method

Participants. We recruited 191 participants to a behavioral laboratory from a Northeastern university. We paid participants \$10 an hour in exchange for their participation. The sample included 61 men. The average age was 20.15 ($SD = 1.38$) years.

Design and procedure. We used a 2 (Accusation: Accusation v. Control) x 2 (Ethicality of the Presentation: Ethical v. Unethical), between-participants design. We randomly assigned participants to one of the four conditions. As in Study 1, participants read about a business problem faced by a chemical company. An ingredient in the company's key product ("Adhesive 100") was outlawed in the United States for causing environmental damage. Participants then

watched videos of confederates posing as participants from prior research studies. The confederates summarized the problem and recommended solutions.

We manipulated the ethicality of the accuser's presentation. In the ethical condition, the first presenter (the accuser) recommended that the company, "Change the formula to be consistent with the law. For example, remove Adhesive 100 to create a slightly different product that would not cause environmental damage." In the unethical condition, the accuser recommended that the company, "Look for loopholes in the law. For example, mix Adhesive 100 with other chemicals to create a slightly different product exempted from the law (despite the environmental damage it causes)." After the first presenter spoke, the second presenter (the target) had no questions or comments.

The second presenter then presented and recommended that the company merge with competitors to obtain better prices from suppliers, advertise the product heavily while it was still legal, and hire a lobbyist to advocate repeal of the law. Following the target's presentation, the accuser either had no comment (Control) or made the following accusation (Accusation): "That solution seems pretty unethical." After the accusation (in the Accusation condition) or no comment (in the Control condition), the presentation concluded and participants completed survey measures of trust.

Measures. Participants responded to all items using scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Cognitive trust. Participants reported their cognitive trust using the same four items (Dunn et al., 2012) we used in our prior studies. The scale was reliable for both the accuser ($\alpha = .90$) and the target ($\alpha = .85$).

Affective trust. Participants also reported their affective trust using the same four items (Dunn et al., 2012) we used in our prior studies. Reliability was high for both the accuser ($\alpha = .80$) and the target ($\alpha = .84$).

Hypocrisy manipulation check. We used three items to measure whether or not the accuser was perceived to be hypocritical. Participants reported their agreement with the following statements about the first presenter (“Presenter A”): Presenter A pretends to be something he is not; when it is convenient, Presenter A claims to have higher principles than he really does; Presenter A’s actions are consistent with his words (reverse-scored), $\alpha = .73$.

Results

Pre-test. We conducted a pre-test ($n = 35$) to confirm that the accuser’s loophole solution and the target’s lobbyist solution were both perceived to be unethical. Using a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), participants reported whether each solution was ethical (reverse-scored), wrong, unethical, immoral, and principled (reverse-scored). The mean for the accuser’s loophole solution ($\alpha = .91$) was significantly higher than the mid-point of the scale ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(34) = 6.16$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.11$). The mean for the target’s lobbyist solution ($\alpha = .95$) was also significantly higher than the mid-point of the scale ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.56$), $t(34) = 3.91$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.34$). Using a paired samples t-test to compare perceptions of the two unethical solutions, the accuser’s loophole solution was seen as less ethical than the target’s lobbyist solution, $t(34) = 2.07$, $p = .047$, $d = 0.71$. This result confirms that the accuser’s own proposal is unethical—and less ethical than the target’s proposal. By accusing the target of being unethical, the accuser is acting hypocritically.

Hypocrisy manipulation check. We first report a manipulation check of our moral hypocrisy induction. We conducted an ANOVA including accusation and accuser ethics as

between-participant factors. Our findings confirm that the moral hypocrisy manipulation was effective. In our ANOVA, we identify two main effects and an interaction. First, we find a significant main effect of the accusation on hypocrisy, $F(1, 187) = 8.23, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .04$. The accuser was perceived to be more hypocritical following an accusation ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.40$) than he was in the control condition ($M = 3.11, SD = 0.88$). Second, we find a main effect of accuser's ethics, $F(1, 187) = 21.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$. The accuser was perceived to be more hypocritical in the unethical condition ($M = 3.68, SD = 1.26$) than he was in the control condition ($M = 2.98, SD = 1.00$). Finally, we find an interaction, $F(1, 187) = 32.55, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$. When the accuser had made an unethical recommendation himself, he was perceived to be more hypocritical in the accusation condition ($M = 4.31, SD = 1.34$) than he was in the control condition ($M = 3.03, SD = 0.74$), $t(93) = 5.76, p < .001, d = 1.18$. When the accuser made an ethical recommendation, he was perceived to be less hypocritical in the accusation ($M = 2.76, SD = 0.96$) than in the control ($M = 3.18, SD = 1.00$) condition, $t(94) = -2.12, p = .04, d = 0.43$. After making an accusation, the accuser was perceived to be more hypocritical when he made unethical ($M = 4.31, SD = 1.34$) rather than ethical ($M = 2.76, SD = 0.96$) recommendations, $t(93) = 6.48, p < .001, d = 1.33$. Without an accusation, we find no significant difference in hypocrisy by accuser ethics, $t(94) = -0.86, p = .39, d = 0.18$. Taken together, the moral hypocrisy manipulation worked as we had expected.

Trust in the accuser. We next examined trust in the accuser. For cognitive trust, we find an interaction between the ethicality of the presentation and whether or not the first presenter (the accuser) made an accusation, $F(1, 187) = 3.70, p = .056, \eta_p^2 = .02$. The main effects of the accusation [$F(1, 187) = 1.86, p = .17, \eta_p^2 = .01$] and accuser ethics [$F(1, 187) = 0.19, p = .66, \eta_p^2 = .001$] were not significant. As we found in Studies 1, 2, and 3, when the accuser was

ethical, making an accusation increased cognitive trust, $t(94) = 2.27, p = .03, d = 0.46$. This provides further support for the cognitive-trust-in-the-accuser hypothesis (Hypothesis 2).

However, when the accuser made an unethical presentation, making an accusation did not significantly influence cognitive trust, $t(93) = -0.41, p = .69, d = 0.08$. These findings support the moral-hypocrisy-moderation hypothesis (Hypothesis 4). We depict cognitive trust in the accuser in Figure 6.

We found no differences across conditions for affective trust in the accuser; the accusation [$F(1, 187) = 2.21, p = .14, \eta_p^2 = .01$], the ethicality of the presentation [$F(1, 187) = 0.53, p = .47, \eta_p^2 = .003$], and their interaction [$F(1, 187) = 0.12, p = .73, \eta_p^2 = .001$] were not significant. As in prior studies, we find no support for the affective-trust-in-the-accuser hypothesis (Hypothesis 1).

Trust in the target. We next examined trust in the target. As before, we find that accusations decreased cognitive trust in the target, consistent with the cognitive-trust-in-the-target hypothesis (Hypothesis 6). We identify a main effect of the accusation, $F(1, 187) = 9.26, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .05$. Compared to the control condition ($M = 4.41, SD = 1.17$), the target was cognitively trusted less in the accusation condition ($M = 3.92, SD = 1.05$). The ethicality of the accuser's presentation [$F(1, 187) = 1.75, p = .19, \eta_p^2 = .009$] and the interaction between the two [$F(1, 187) = 0.85, p = .36, \eta_p^2 = .005$] were not significant.

We then analyzed affective trust in the target. We found no differences in affective trust across conditions; the accusation [$F(1, 187) = 0.00, p = .97, \eta_p^2 = .00$], the ethicality of the accuser's presentation [$F(1, 187) = 1.77, p = .19, \eta_p^2 = .009$], and their interaction [$F(1, 187) = 0.13, p = .72, \eta_p^2 = .001$] were not significant. We find no support for the affective-trust-in-the-target hypothesis (Hypothesis 5).

Discussion

In Study 4, we identify moral hypocrisy as a key moderator of the relationship between making an accusation and boosting cognitive trust in the accuser. As in Studies 1, 2, and 3, we find that ethical accusers gained cognitive trust when they made an accusation. However, when the accuser had proposed an unethical solution himself, accusing another person of being unethical was perceived to be hypocritical and did not enhance cognitive trust. That is, although accusers can benefit from making accusations, they can only derive these benefits when they have acted ethically themselves.

General Discussion

Accusations can transform workplace relationships, but no prior work has explored the interpersonal consequences of accusations. In this work, we introduce and define accusations. Our pilot study reveals that accusations are prevalent in organizations, and that accusations regarding ethical violations are particularly common. By introducing and defining accusations, our work builds a foundation for future research to study a pervasive and consequential phenomenon. To date, accusations have received virtually no attention from organizational scholars. We call attention to this important construct and advocate for future accusation research.

Our findings reveal that accusations have important interpersonal consequences. Across four experiments, we describe how accusations influence interpersonal perceptions. We link accusations with trust, a construct critical to effective and efficient organizational functioning (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001, 2002; Golembiewski & McConkie, 1975; Granovetter, 1985; Kramer, 1999; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011). We demonstrate that accusations can benefit accusers at the expense of targets and group cohesion.

We find that individuals are perceived to be *more* trustworthy and to have higher ethical standards when they make accusations than when they do not make accusations. Making an accusation increases cognitive trust by projecting high ethical standards. By projecting high ethical standards, accusations communicate integrity, a critical determinant of trust (Mayer et al., 1995). Accusations in our investigation did not influence affective trust. Although making an accusation could depress affective trust by signaling low benevolence, we did not find evidence of this in our studies.

Accusations represent a potent impression management tool. Impression management is “the process by which people control the impressions others form of them” (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 34). This was certainly the case for accusers. Even when accusations provided no new factual information about the target’s behavior, accusations not only reduced trust in the target, but also elevated trust in the accuser by signaling high ethical standards.

One advantage of our investigative approach is our ability to control the accused person’s actions across accusation conditions. This approach enabled us to disentangle the unique effects of making an accusation. In our studies, participants’ perceptions of the accused were directly influenced by the views expressed by another person. Consistent with prior research on social influence (Asch, 1956; Cialdini, 1993; Milgram, 1963), our work attests to the influence individuals have on each other’s perceptions and behavior.

In addition to examining trust, our findings identify another important consequence of accusations. Accusations have the potential to harm group functioning. Specifically, our findings reveal that accusations increase relationship conflict within the group and lower group identification. Prior work has linked relationship conflict and lower identification with turnover,

low satisfaction, and less cooperation in groups (Blader & Tyler, 2009; Jehn, 1995). We conjecture that accusations could be corrosive for work groups and organizations.

For individuals, our research identifies an effective approach for communicating integrity. Although integrity is important for trust (Mayer et al., 1995), little prior research has examined how individuals might communicate integrity to others or judge the integrity of others. Communicating integrity is especially important for leaders in organizations, because their behavior sets the norm for others to follow (Mayer et al., 2009). Our research suggests that making an accusation is an effective method to signal high ethical standards. Taken together, our findings demonstrate that accusations represent an effective—but potentially costly—tool to manage impressions. Accusations benefit accusers, but these benefits may come at the expense of targets and groups.

It is possible, however, that even as accusations promote group conflict, accusations could benefit organizations by enforcing norms and promoting ethical behavior. To ensure ethical conduct, organizations must set an ethical tone (Mayer et al., 2013). To do so, organizations need to encourage detection and punishment of unethical behavior. Punishment of norm violators has been conceptualized as an altruistic behavior (Fehr & Gächter, 2000). Our findings challenge this conceptualization. Rather than reflecting altruism, accusers may derive substantial personal *benefits* from punishing norm violators. The trust benefits of making an accusation provide a reason for even the most self-interested actors to intervene when they perceive unethical activity. That is, even when self-interest is the norm (e.g., Pillutla & Chen, 1999), individuals have trust incentives to openly oppose unethical behavior.

Our finding regarding the benefits of making an accusation may help to explain why some accusers, such as whistle-blowers, are ostracized for their behavior. Rather than acting out

of purely altruistic motives, accusers may have acted out of self-interest. Whereas some prior work (e.g., Callahan & Dworkin, 1992) has focused on the monetary gains whistleblowers obtain, our research suggests that accusers can obtain social benefits in the form of elevated trust.

Practical Contributions

Accusations affect interpersonal perceptions and behavior, and our findings deliver a number of practical managerial implications. First, accusations can curtail unethical behavior. Both the direct effect, limiting the influence of unethical actors, and the indirect effect, warning potential unethical actors of the costs of unethical behavior, of accusations can curb undesirable behavior. In addition, accusations provide managers with useful information. Managers learn not only about potential violations within their organization, but they can also glean information about employees' ethical standards. Quite possibly, employees who make accusations are exactly the right type of people to put into leadership positions. Leaders with high ethical standards can set an ethical climate in organizations (Mayer et al., 2009; Mayer et al., 2013), and selecting the right people can have profound benefits.

Even when valid accusations are leveled, however, accusations are likely to create group conflict. And worse, when individuals use accusations to advance their own individual goals—of undermining others or managing others' impressions of them—accusers are likely to harm both the targets of their accusations and the group. Managers may need to hold people accountable for the accusations they make to ensure that accusers do not unfairly benefit at the expense of others. Specifically, when managers hear of accusations, they should be ready to investigate them. In some cases, accusations may be unfounded, and managers should remain receptive to the possibility that unfounded accusations are mistakes as well as the possibility that accusations are

strategic weapons. Following an accusation, managers may need to engage in an effortful evaluation to ensure targets of an accusation are not unfairly distrusted.

Finally, leaders may need to take steps to mitigate relationship conflict caused by accusations. Even well-founded accusations can promote conflict, and unresolved conflict may negatively impact group functioning (Jehn, 1995).

Future Directions

Our findings suggest a number of directions for future inquiry. First, future research should examine how targets experience and react to accusations. In this research, we focused on observers' perceptions of the accuser and the target. Targets' reactions are likely to be quite different from those of observers. For targets, accusations may substantially reduce their affective trust in the accuser, especially when the audience who hears the accusation is large. Second, future research should explore the interplay between accusations and status. Quite possibly, a target's social status may moderate reactions to an accusation. High status individuals perceive others to have more positive intentions toward them, and as a result high status targets may react less negatively to accusations than lower status individuals (Pettit & Sivanathan, 2012). Similarly, the relative power of the accused and the accuser may moderate the effects of accusations. Higher power individuals are believed to be more competent than lower power individuals (Magee, Kilduff, & Heath, 2011), and high power accusers may benefit more than lower power accusers because their accusations may seem particularly credible.

Third, future research should also examine false accusations. Accusations are not always true. Importantly, accusations can be motivated by a wide range of incentives and this feature of accusations could have dysfunctional consequences. For instance, individuals may make false accusations to benefit themselves at the expense of others. Prior work has found that individuals

often care more about appearing fair than being fair (Pillutla & Murnighan, 1995). If individuals care more about appearing to have integrity than actually having it, false accusations may represent a serious problem. Importantly, observers may recognize that accusations are false at the time they are made or learn later that they are false. When accusations are known to be false when they are made, the influence of accusations on trust should diminish or even reverse. When accusations are later revealed to be false, however, it is unclear how initial perceptions of trust will change. Due to anchoring effects (cf. Gunia, Swaab, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2013; Kim, Cooper, Dirks, & Ferrin, 2013; Mussweiler, 2003), the initial impressions created by accusations may be far more robust than they deserve to be.

Fourth, future work should explore whether accusations are made publicly or privately. When accusations are made privately, observers may perceive the accusation to be more genuine, but perhaps less serious. Similarly, the size and composition of the audience is likely to substantially moderate the influence of accusations on interpersonal perceptions.

Fifth, attributes of the accuser may also moderate the effects of accusations. People may discount accusations from motivated others. Individuals in competition with each other may be motivated to disparage each other (e.g., politicians running against each other). Future work should explore when accusations are perceived to signal aggression or self-interest, rather than integrity.

Sixth, future research should examine when the net effects of accusations help groups and when they hurt them. Accusations hold others accountable for ethical violations. When ethical violations are large in magnitude, accusations may help groups. Yet we find that accusations harm group harmony. When ethical violations are small, group harmony may be relatively more important.

Seventh, researchers should examine accusations in field settings. Our laboratory methods afford high control and enable us to draw causal inferences, but future work should explore both antecedents and consequences of accusations within organizations. For example, future work should explore perceptions of accusers and targets over time, as well as the relationships among hierarchy, the magnitude of the violation, accusations, and how the target reacts.

Finally, future research should explore a variety of different types of accusations. We focused on ethics-related accusations, and our pilot data suggest that ethics violations are both common and important. However, future research should extend our investigation to examine other types of accusations as well. For example, by making an accusation of incompetence, individuals might signal high standards for task performance.

Conclusion

Our investigation breaks new ground by introducing a powerful and prevalent, but understudied phenomenon—accusations. We document how an accusation affects perceptions of the accuser, perceptions of the target, and group conflict. Across our studies, we demonstrate that individuals can derive significant impression management benefits by accusing others of unethical behavior. Compared to individuals who did not make accusations, accusers engendered greater trust and were perceived to have higher ethical standards. Accusations harmed trust in targets and elevated conflict in the group. Because workplace relationships require both competition and cooperation (Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2015; Milkman, Huang, & Schweitzer, 2015), accusations may be appealing tools for those who seek to compete under a guise of cooperation. Managers must attend carefully to the dual functions of accusations to ascertain whether accusers act as “intuitive prosecutors” enforcing group norms (Tetlock, 2002; Tetlock et

al., 2007) or as “intuitive politicians” to manage their own impressions to advance their self-interest (Goffman, 1959).

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TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study 2

| Variable | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------------------|----------|-----------|----|--------|--------|
| 1. Cognitive trust | 5.16 | 1.06 | -- | .43*** | .63*** |
| 2. Affective trust | 4.16 | 1.20 | | -- | .39*** |
| 3. Ethical standards | 4.86 | 1.32 | | | -- |

† $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

TABLE 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study 3

| Variable | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|--------------------------|----------|-----------|----|-----|--------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|
| Accuser | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1. Trust (behavioral) | 1.34 | 0.80 | -- | .13 | .02 | -.07 | -.08 | -.05 | .32** | .03 |
| 2. Cognitive trust | 4.99 | 1.04 | | -- | .51*** | -.20* | .02 | .16 | .34** | .28** |
| 3. Affective trust | 3.81 | 1.38 | | | -- | -.27** | .00 | .46*** | .27** | .24* |
| Target | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Trust (behavioral) | 0.88 | 0.69 | | | | -- | .31** | .10 | -.30** | .13 |
| 5. Cognitive trust | 3.50 | 1.38 | | | | | -- | .57*** | -.33** | .22* |
| 6. Affective trust | 2.68 | 1.33 | | | | | | -- | -.21* | .42*** |
| Group | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Relationship conflict | 1.92 | 1.04 | | | | | | | -- | -.21* |
| 8. Identification | 3.19 | 1.30 | | | | | | | | -- |

† $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

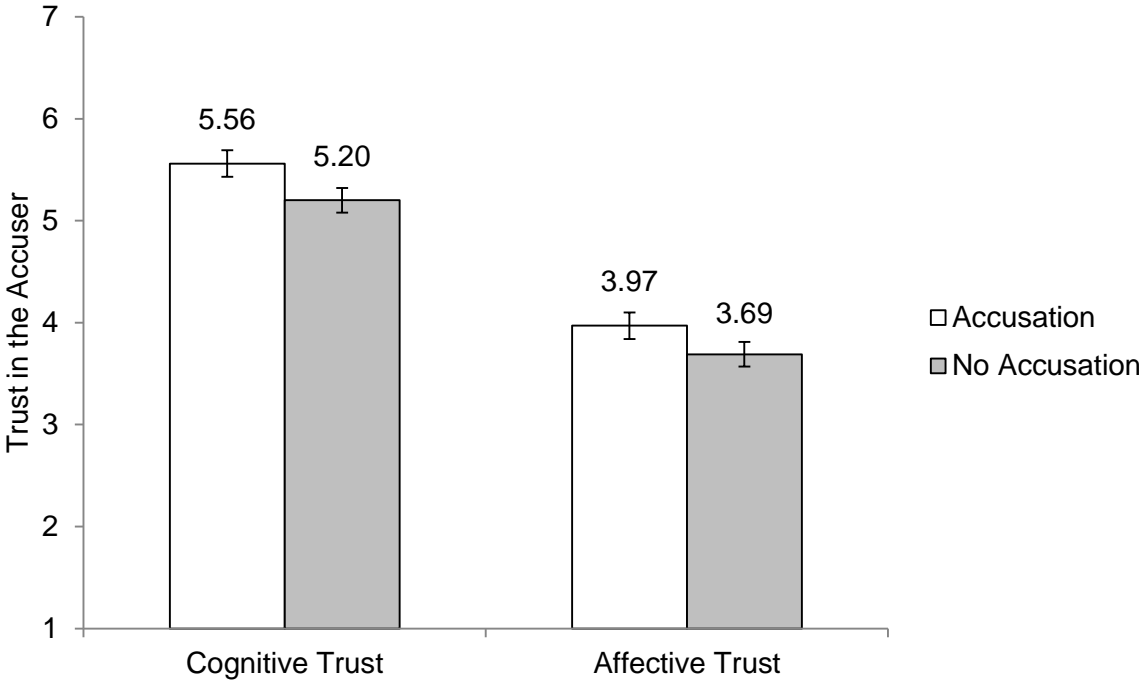


Figure 1. Trust in the accuser in Study 1.

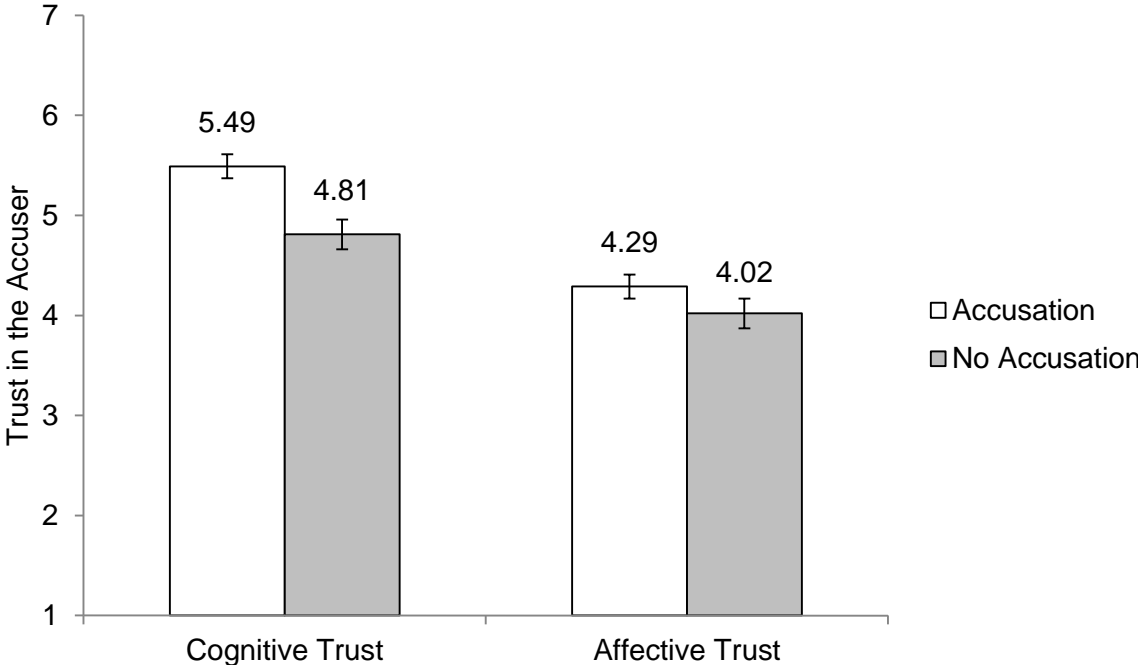


Figure 2. Trust in the accuser in Study 2.

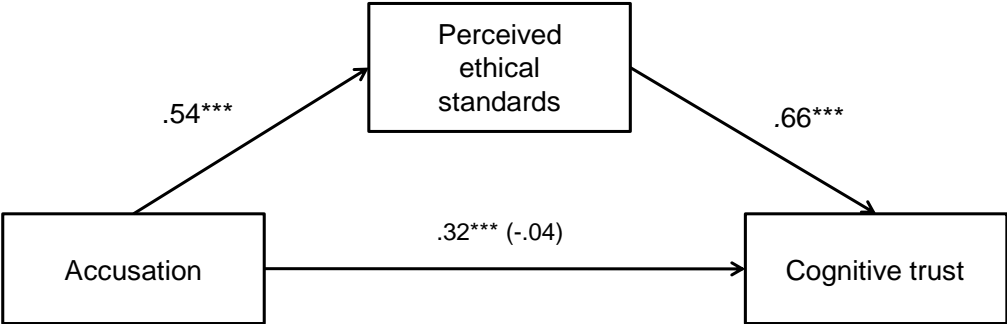


Figure 3. Mediation analysis from Study 2.

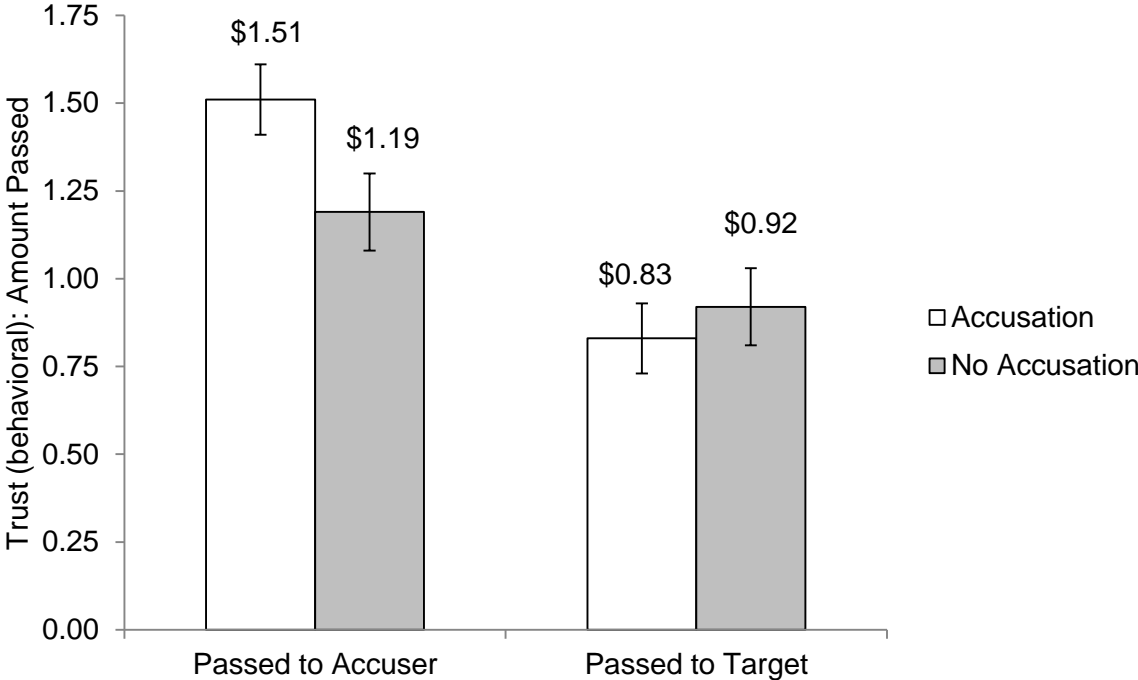


Figure 4. Trust (behavioral measure) in Study 3.

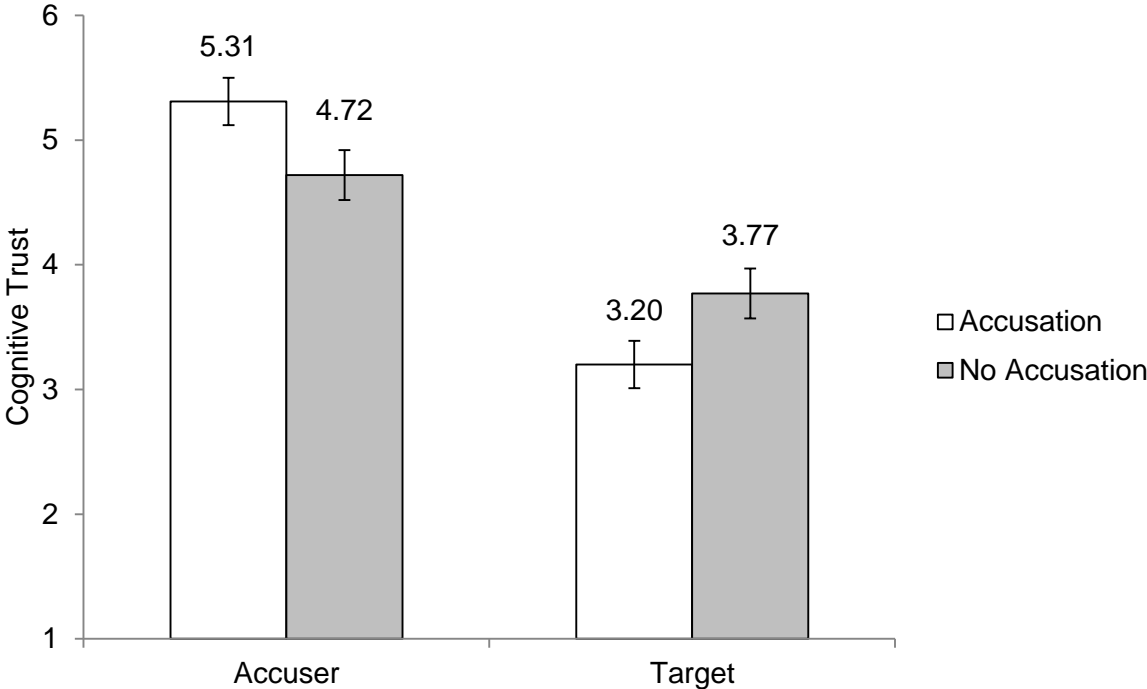


Figure 5. Cognitive trust in Study 3

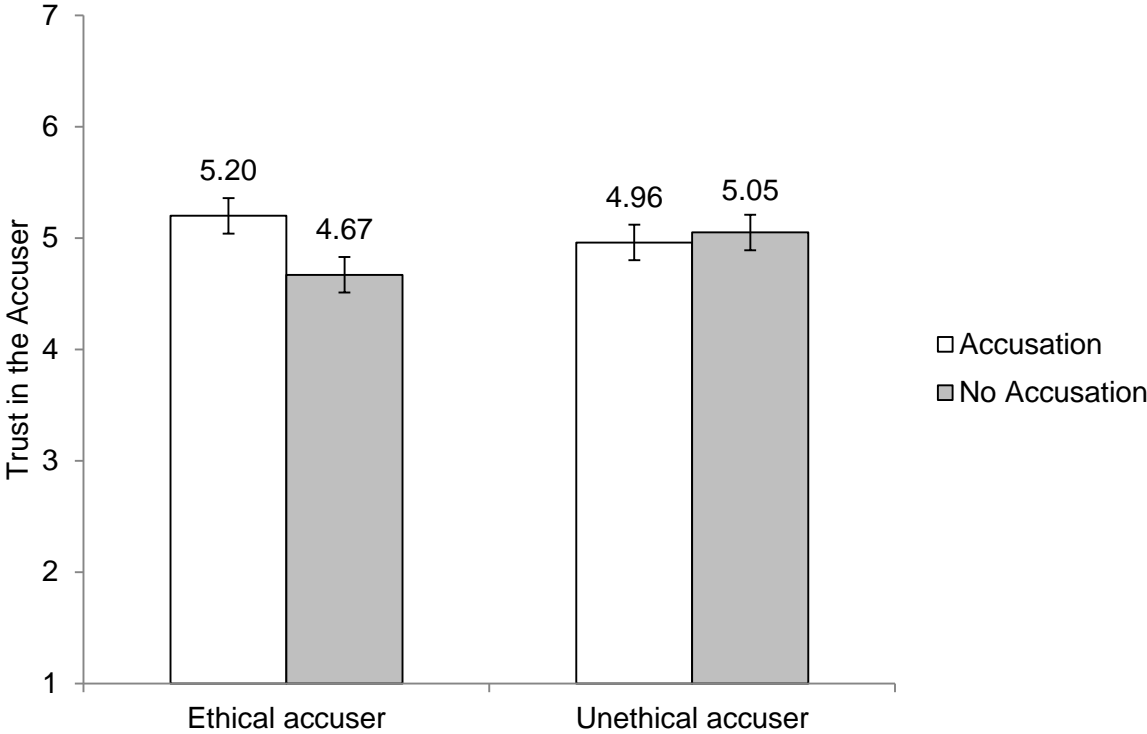


Figure 6. Cognitive trust in the accuser in Study 4.