Cynical, but useful?: A lay beliefs perspective on cynical leaders' ability to prevent antisocial behavior at work

Original Article

Cynical, But Useful?

A Lay Beliefs Perspective on Cynical Leaders' Ability to Prevent Antisocial Behavior at Work

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Abstract: Cynicism – the belief that people are driven primarily by self-interest – has been predominantly associated with detrimental consequences for individuals and organizations. Less is known about its potentially positive implications. We investigated whether lay people consider cynicism helpful in preventing antisocial behavior and therefore see value in cynical leaders. We found that people viewed cynical (vs. trusting) leaders as better at detecting antisocial behavior and more punitive, and therefore, as better at preventing employees' antisocial behavior (Study 1). Despite this, cynical (vs. trusting) leaders were less likely to be hired, were offered lower salaries, and were seen as less effective (Study 2). This aversion to cynical leaders was attenuated for jobs that emphasized the importance of preventing antisocial behavior (Study 3).

Keywords: cynicism, trust, leadership, antisocial behavior, lay beliefs

> Distrust and caution are the parents of security.
>
> Benjamin Franklin (1733, p. 8)

> Organized distrust produces trustworthy reports.
>
> Donald T. Campbell (1984, p. 35)

Cynicism describes the belief that humans are primarily driven by self-interest and that they will go to great lengths to satisfy it (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016). This definition represents a synthesis of several streams of literature, such as research on cynical distrust (Greenglass & Julkunen, 1989), social cynicism (Bond et al., 2004), Machiavellian cynicism (Christie & Geis, 1970), and generalized (dis)trust (Rousseau et al., 1998), which all center around a negative view of human nature. Cynicism is often juxtaposed with constructs such as trust and idealism (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016), and has mainly been associated with negative consequences for both cynical people themselves and those they interact with. Cynical individuals are more likely to suffer from poor physical (Neuvonen et al., 2014) and mental health (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2019a); they tend to experience more financial hardship (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016), and have more conflicts in interpersonal relationships (Baron et al., 2007; Kaplan et al., 2004). Cynics also seem to be viewed negatively by others: People are more disrespectful toward more (vs. less) cynical interaction partners (Stavrova et al., 2020).

However, less attention has been paid to the potential "bright sides" of cynicism. We suggest that cynicism might carry some benefits, in terms of its reputational consequences. For example, prior research has shown that people associate cynicism with intelligence and assume that cynical individuals are more competent than non-cynical individuals – and that this belief exists in several different cultures (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2019b). Similarly, it is possible that people perceive cynicism, and the distrustful mindset associated with it (Bond et al., 2004; Kurman, 2011), as useful in certain contexts. The two opening quotes imply the existence of the following belief: The best way to promote security and diligence in organizations is to adopt a cynical, suspicious, and distrustful stance toward others. Indeed, examples of this belief can be found in current organizational practices: Corporate giants like Amazon are notorious for tracking their workers' every move, presumably under the assumption that not doing so would be detrimental to their productivity (Kantor et al., 2021). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses resorted to monitoring employees' computer use while they worked from home, to prevent them from slacking (Duncan, 2021). These policies might reflect a general understanding of vigilance and suspicion as necessary components of (organizational)

leadership, potentially resulting in a demand for leaders who embody those traits. Cynics might be viewed as ideal candidates for fulfilling this demand.

In this research, we explored whether people see potential benefits in cynical leaders, by attributing them a greater ability to prevent others from engaging in antisocial behavior at work than trusting leaders. Because lay people tend to base their predictions about others' behavior on an assumption of rationality (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Blakely, 2020; Bonnefon et al., 2012), we derived our predictions from the theoretical framework of rational choice theory (Becker, 1993; Lewicki, 1983), and tested two underlying mechanisms that might explain this effect (perceived ability to detect and perceived likelihood to punish antisocial behavior). Moreover, we juxtaposed the perceived ability to prevent antisocial behavior with the perceived ability to encourage others to engage in prosocial behavior and examined whether cynical leaders are viewed as worse at this skill relative to trusting leaders. Finally, we investigated the downstream consequences of these perceptions for hiring preferences.

The present work thus focuses on exploring the possibility that cynicism has positive reputational consequences and answers a call for more research into why cynicism continues to proliferate despite its otherwise negative outcomes (Neumann & Zaki, 2023). Furthermore, we extend the framework of rational choice theory to the prediction of lay beliefs about behavior, rather than behavior itself. Finally, this work informs the literature on the social consequences of personality perceptions (Back & Vazire, 2015; Plaks et al., 2009). Lay beliefs about target personality can have important implications for how people behave and interact with a target in general (Heslin et al., 2006; Stavrova et al., 2022) and in the context of personnel selection in particular (Highhouse, 2008). Investigating how people view cynical leaders, and how they use this information in organizational decision-making, thus not only contributes to our knowledge of lay beliefs about personality at work, but also provides further insights into how these lay beliefs might affect the organizational outcomes of cynical individuals.

Perceptions of Cynical Leaders

Originally conceptualized as a theory of economic behavior, rational choice theory is based on the assumption that people are rational actors (i.e., homo economicus). It posits that prior to making a decision, a person will perform a cost–benefit analysis to determine which outcome would maximize their own utility. If the costs of performing an action are determined to outweigh the benefits, then the person will abstain from the action and vice versa (Becker, 1993). As applied to antisocial behavior, rational choice theory argues for three distinct factors that determine whether someone will engage in antisocial behavior: the benefits one stands to gain from it, the probability of getting caught, and the severity of punishment (Lewicki, 1983). Previous research has demonstrated that, when (lay) people make predictions about individuals' behavior, they also rely on the assumption that individuals will act as rational agents (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Blakely, 2020; Bonnefon et al., 2012). Indeed, there is evidence that lay people often overestimate the extent to which self-interest and utility maximization drive human behavior (Miller, 1999; Miller & Ratner, 1998). Similarly, research on reasoning in children indicates that people view punishment as an effective form of deterrence from an early age (Bregant et al., 2016). Taken together, these findings suggest that lay people's predictions about what determines human behavior should overlap with the predictions of rational choice theory. As applied to the prevention of antisocial behavior, this means that lay people are likely to believe that an employee's decision to, for example, lie to their boss, will depend on how much the employee can benefit from deception, the likelihood of getting caught, and the harshness of the punishment. The latter two factors, in turn, will often depend on the characteristics of those responsible for enforcing the rules (i.e., leaders). Thus, lay beliefs about what kind of leader it takes to prevent antisocial behavior should be based on the extent to which this leader is perceived as good at detecting, as well as punishing, such behavior. We suggest that lay people are more likely to see these characteristics in cynical rather than trusting leaders.

When it comes to the detection of antisocial behavior, there are two main reasons why lay people might attribute this skill to cynical leaders over trusting leaders. First, (lay) people tend to overestimate the extent to which others engage in self-interested behaviors (Miller, 1999). Since cynics believe self-interest to be everyone's primary motivation, lay people should be more likely to consider a cynical leader a good judge of character, who can more easily catch an employee that tries to advance their self-interest through illicit means. Conversely, previous research suggests that (lay) people might intuitively associate trust with gullibility (Yamagishi et al., 1999). As a result, a trusting leader might be viewed as more gullible (i.e., insensitive to cues of deception or other antisocial behaviors) and therefore unable to understand when others try to fool them (Teunisse et al.,

2020). Taken together, these findings indicate that lay people should be more likely to associate the ability to detect antisocial behavior with cynical rather than trusting leaders.

Similarly, cynical leaders should be seen as more punitive than trusting leaders. Cynical individuals are more likely to respond with heightened anger and hostility to others in social situations (Allred & Smith, 1991). Perceptions of anger in others are in turn associated with expectations of harsher behavioral responses, such as more severe sanctions or even aggression (Carmichael & Piquero, 2004). Cynical leaders might therefore be perceived as more likely to lash out at their subordinates when they transgress, and thus as more punitive. In sum, lay people may assume that a cynical leader is more likely to deter their subordinates from engaging in antisocial behavior – by attributing them both a higher probability of catching wrongdoing and a higher probability of doling out a harsher punishment (i.e., the perceived deterrents of antisocial behavior according to rational choice theory).

Beyond being able to prevent antisocial behavior, another skill through which leaders can directly benefit their organization is the ability to encourage employees' prosocial behavior – such as actively engaging with the development of, expressing loyalty toward, or proposing ideas to improve the organization (Lee & Allen, 2002). When it comes to lay beliefs about cynical leaders, we suggest that there might be a potential trade-off in perceived skills, such that people see these leaders as better at preventing antisocial behavior, but worse at encouraging prosocial behavior, than trusting leaders. This could be due to the same mechanisms described earlier: Cynics might be perceived as more punitive, and therefore as unlikely to also inspire positive, proactive behaviors in their employees. Indeed, previous research has found that leadership based on punishment and control is antithetical to promoting organizational citizenship behaviors (Seppälä et al., 2011). Similarly, perceiving their leader as a "watchdog", preoccupied with catching liars and cheaters, might increase employees' concerns about being accused of antisocial behavior themselves, and in turn prevent the formation of trust and cooperation required for them to engage in positive behaviors that go above and beyond fulfilling their daily tasks (Lin & Hsiao, 2014). We therefore explore whether the same perceived skills that make cynical leaders seem better at preventing antisocial behavior might conversely make them seem worse at encouraging prosocial behavior in their employees.

The Current Research

In sum, we posit that lay people will perceive cynical leaders as better at detecting antisocial behavior, as well as punishing it, than trusting leaders. These perceptions, in turn, should result in the belief that cynical leaders are better at preventing their subordinates from engaging in antisocial behavior than trusting leaders. In addition, we also explore whether cynical managers are seen as worse at encouraging prosocial behavior than trusting managers. Finally, we investigate the downstream consequences of these beliefs, specifically, whether they translate into hiring preferences, and whether they do so across organizational contexts that differ in the importance placed on preventing antisocial behavior.

We present the results of three studies. In Study 1, we examined whether people attribute cynical (vs. trusting) leaders a greater ability to prevent employees' antisocial behavior (Hypothesis 1.1) and a lesser ability to encourage employees' prosocial behavior (Hypothesis 1.2), and whether this is mediated by the belief that cynical leaders are better at detecting, as well as punishing, antisocial behavior (Hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2). In Study 2, we examined whether these two perceived abilities (preventing antisocial behavior and encouraging prosocial behavior) resulted in preferential hiring of cynical (vs. trusting) leaders (Hypotheses 3.1 and 3.2). Finally, in Study 3, we experimentally manipulated whether the leader's position stressed the importance of preventing antisocial behavior, to explore if this changes the effect of leader cynicism on hiring preferences (Hypothesis 4). Our full research model can be seen in Figure 1.

We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in these studies. The materials and data can be accessed at https://osf.io/fcrs4/?view_only=28315b020df741e3a400fb13b10b219d. All three studies, including hypotheses, procedures, and analysis plans, were pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/D56_LQR, https://aspredicted.org/9ZX_LC3, https://aspredicted.org/2C1_HPP). We did not deviate from these pre-registrations.

Study 1

We predicted that people would expect a cynical (vs. trusting) manager[1] to be better at preventing antisocial behavior (Hypothesis 1.1) and worse at encouraging

[1] We refer to cynical managers (rather than simply "leaders") in our Method and Results sections, since that is the wording we used in our studies to present participants with a specific leadership position.

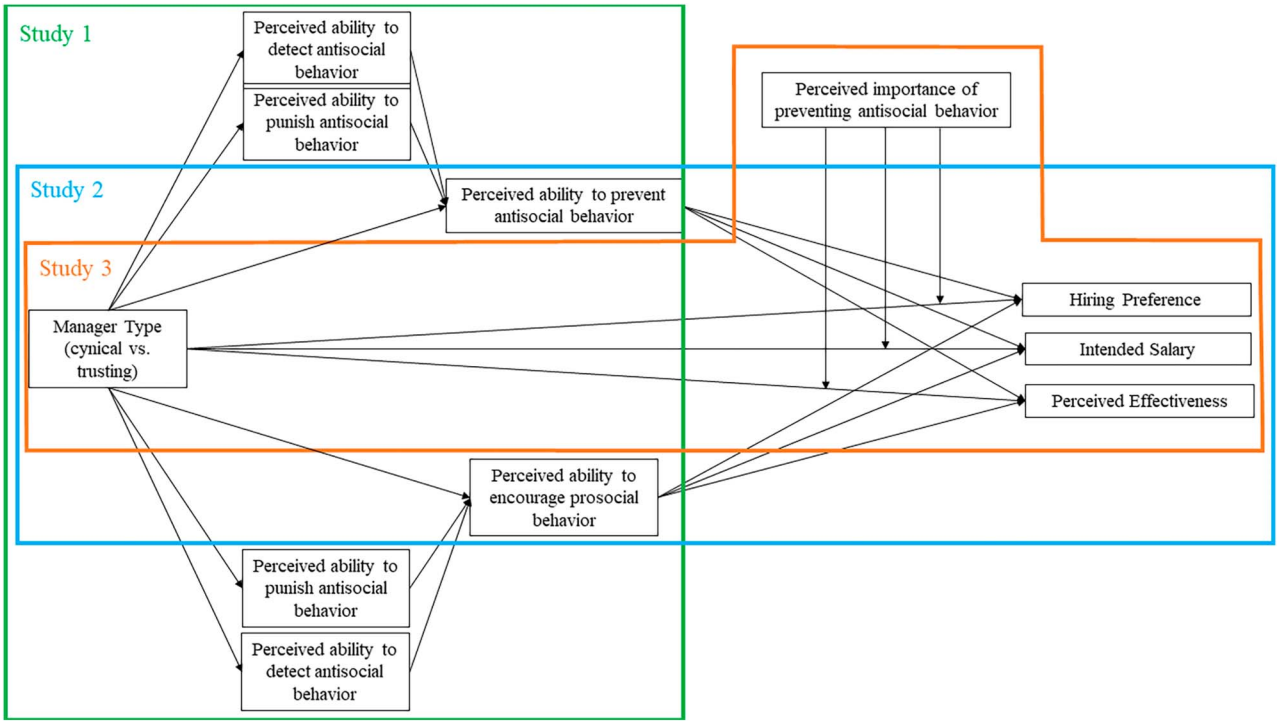

Figure 1. Research model.

prosocial behavior in their employees (Hypothesis 1.2) and that these effects would be mediated by perceptions of the cynical manager as better at detecting antisocial behavior, and more punitive, than the trusting manager (Hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2). To test this, we presented participants with either a cynical or a trusting manager in a between-subjects design and asked them to indicate how effective they believed this person would be at preventing antisocial behavior and encouraging prosocial behavior, as well as detecting and punishing antisocial behavior.

Participants

A power analysis (see the sample size section of the preregistration) indicated that a minimum of 220 participants would be needed. To compensate for participants failing an attention check, we recruited a total of 256 participants via the UK online platform Prolific. We recruited participants familiar with an organizational environment by restricting participation to people who were employed by a for-profit company or business. Twelve participants failed the attention check and were excluded, resulting in a final sample of $N = 244$ employees (128 men, 113 women, two "other" responses, 1 nonresponse), with an average age of 37.6 years ($SD = 10.3$).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were introduced to the character of Jamie, a low-level manager, and given a summary of Jamie's personality profile, which described Jamie as either cynical (*cynical manager condition*) or trusting (*trusting manager condition*); for full manipulation texts, see the Electronic Supplementary Material, ESM 1. This was followed by four items measuring Jamie's perceived cynicism, which served as our manipulation check ("To what extent do you think Jamie sees other people as… self-interested/trustworthy/unfair/honest, 1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very*; after reverse-coding positive items, all four items were averaged; α = .94). Finally, participants were presented with the following scales in randomized order.

Preventing Antisocial Behavior

This skill was measured using eight items adapted from the Deviant Workplace Behavior Scale (Bennett & Robinson, 2000); (e.g., "Considering what you know about Jamie, how good do you think Jamie is at preventing employees from taking property from work without permission?" 1 = *very bad*; 7 = *very good*; α = .95).

Encouraging Prosocial Behavior

We measured this ability with eight items adapted from the Organizational Citizenship Behavior Scale (Lee &

Allen, 2002); (e.g., "Considering what you know about Jamie, how good do you think Jamie is at encouraging employees to express loyalty toward the organization?" 1 = *very bad*; 7 = *very good*; α = .97).

Detecting Antisocial Behavior[2]

To measure this skill, we adapted six items from the Gullibility Scale (Teunisse et al., 2020); (e.g., "Considering what you know about Jamie, to what extent do you think Jamie is quick to notice when someone is trying to cheat them?" 1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very*; α = .91).

Punitiveness

Punitiveness was measured with five questions loosely based on items from the Punitiveness Scale (Mackey & Courtright, 2000) and the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005); (e.g., "Considering what you know about Jamie, how likely do you think Jamie is to punish misbehaving employees harshly?"; 1 = *very unlikely*; 7 = *very likely*; α = .95). An exploratory factor analysis showed that all five items load on the same underlying factor (see ESM 1).

Results

Correlations

Correlations between the main variables can be found in Table E1 (see ESM 1).

Manipulation Check

Participants in the *cynical manager* condition rated the manager as having a more cynical view of other people (n = 122, M = 4.16, SD = 0.59) than participants in the *trusting manager* condition (n = 122, M = 1.49, SD = 0.51), $t(236) = 37.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 4.84$, CI[3] [4.34; 5.34].

Perceptions of Manager Abilities

Participants judged the cynical manager as better at preventing their employees from engaging in antisocial behavior (M = 4.67, SD = 1.36) than the trusting manager (M = 3.87, SD = 1.31), ($t(242) = 4.71$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.60$, CI [0.35; 0.86]) (see Figure 2a). Conversely, participants believed the cynical manager to be worse at encouraging prosocial behavior in their employees (M = 2.80, SD = 1.15) than the trusting manager (M = 4.96, SD = 1.09), ($t(242) = -15.01$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.93$, CI [−2.24; −1.63]) (see Figure 2b).

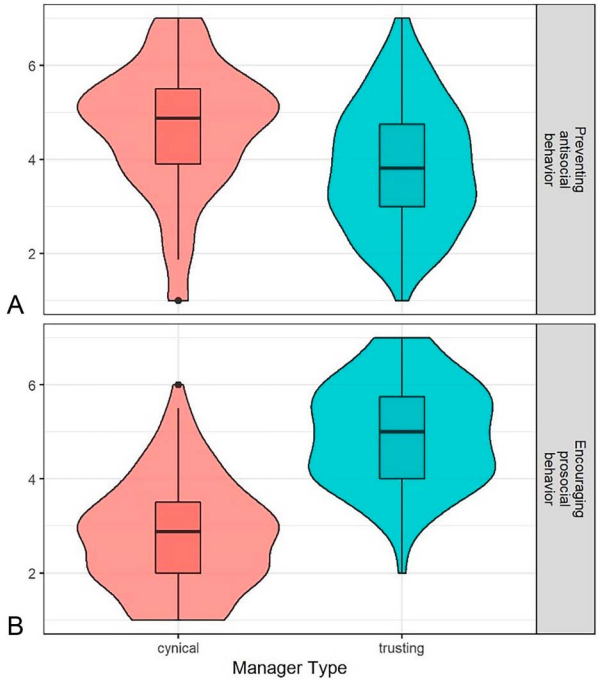

Figure 2. Study 1: Mean perceived ability to prevent antisocial behavior and encourage prosocial behavior of the trusting versus cynical manager. Violin plots indicate density distributions; boxplots indicate 25th and 75th quartiles.

Furthermore, the cynical manager was seen as better at detecting antisocial behavior in their employees (M = 4.91, SD = 1.10) than the trusting manager (M = 3.29, SD = 1.17) ($t(242) = 11.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.42$, CI [1.14; 1.71]) and also as more punitive of this behavior (M = 5.87, SD = 0.92) than the trusting manager (M = 2.88, SD = 0.84; $t(242) = 26.49$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.39$, CI [3.00; 3.78]; see Figure 3a, b).

Mediation Analyses

We found that the cynical (vs. trusting) manager was perceived as better at detecting antisocial behavior and more punitive, both of which were in turn associated with a stronger perceived ability to prevent antisocial behavior (see Figure 4a). Both indirect effects (perceived ability to detect antisocial behavior: 0.66, SE = 0.15, CI [0.39; 0.96] and perceived punitiveness: 0.92, SE = 0.41, CI [0.05; 1.63]) were significant. When looking at ability to encourage prosocial behavior as the outcome variable, only the indirect effect via perceived ability to detect antisocial behavior reached significance (0.36, SE = 0.12, CI [0.15; 0.60]; see Figure 4b).

[2] This variable was originally called deception detection. We adjusted this wording later, on the grounds that the construct we use is broader than the ability to detect deception.

[3] Here and throughout the paper: 95% CI.

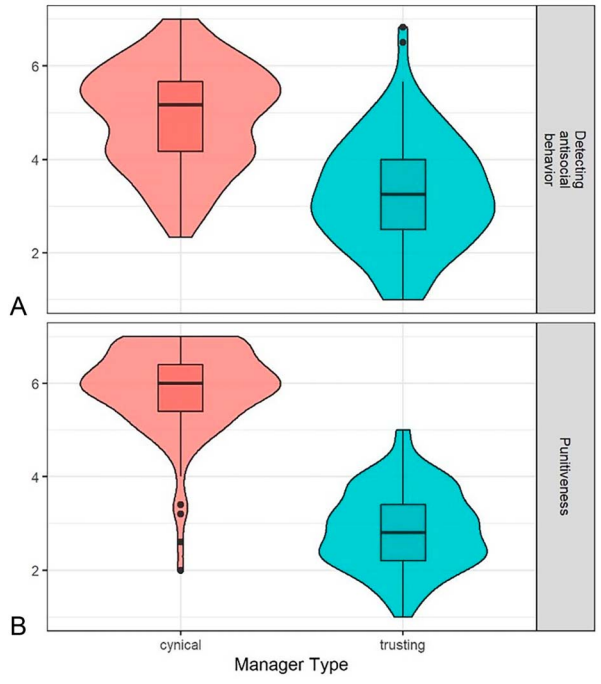

Figure 3. Study 1: Mean perceived ability to detect antisocial behavior and mean punitiveness of the trusting versus cynical manager. Violin plots indicate density distributions; boxplots indicate 25th and 75th quartiles.

Discussion

Study 1 showed that participants viewed the cynical manager as better at preventing antisocial behavior at work than the trusting manager (supporting Hypothesis 1.1). This was mediated by the manager's perceived punitiveness and ability to detect antisocial behavior (supporting Hypothesis 2.1). Furthermore, the cynical manager was seen as less capable of encouraging their employees to engage in behaviors that might benefit the company than the trusting manager (supporting Hypothesis 1.2). This effect was mediated by perceived ability to detect antisocial behavior, but not perceived punitiveness (thus not supporting Hypothesis 2.2). In Study 2, we investigated which of the perceived skillsets – better ability to prevent antisocial behavior or worse ability to encourage prosocial behavior – would translate into actual hiring preferences.

Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to investigate whether manager cynicism affects individuals' hiring preferences. Drawing from the results of Study 1, we tested two competing hypotheses: People could be more likely to hire the cynical (vs. trusting) manager due to the belief that a cynical manager will be better at preventing antisocial behavior (Hypothesis 3.1). Alternatively, people could be more likely to hire the trusting (vs. cynical) manager due to the belief that a trusting manager will be better at encouraging prosocial behavior (Hypothesis 3.2).

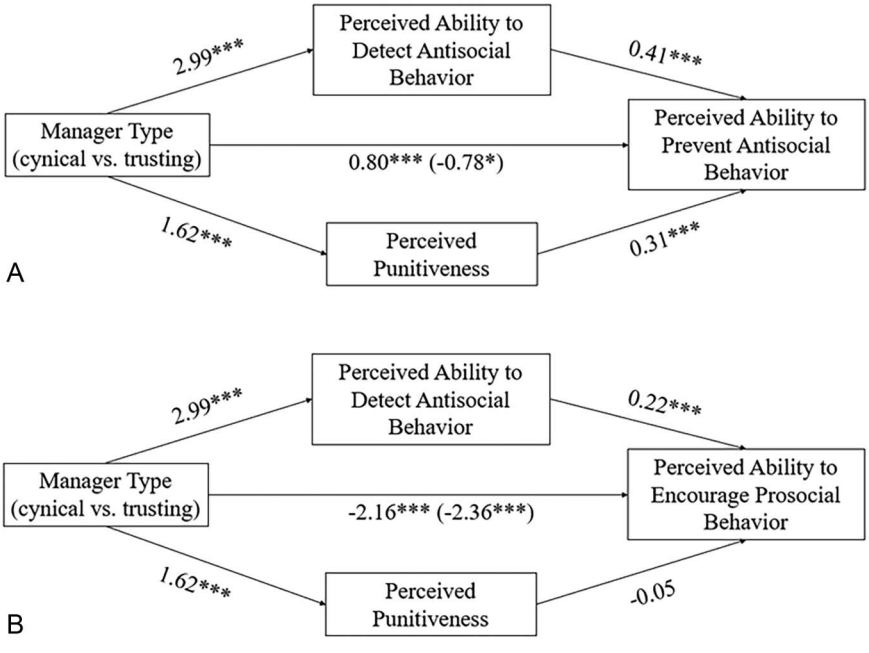

Figure 4. Study 1: Mediation analyses with unstandardized coefficients. Effect of manager type on perceived ability to prevent antisocial behavior and encourage prosocial behavior, mediated by perceived ability to detect antisocial behavior and perceived punitiveness. ***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p < .05$. Manager type: 1 = *cynical*, 0 = *trusting*. Direct effect in brackets.

Participants

As in Study 1, we aimed to recruit at least 250 participants, who were currently employed at an organization, via Prolific. People who had already participated in Study 1 were not invited to participate. The total sample consisted of 258 participants. Six participants failed the attention check and were excluded, resulting in a final sample of $N = 252$ (131 men, 121 women). Participants had an average age of 38.5 years ($SD = 10.4$).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were asked to imagine that they were an HR manager and had to hire someone for an open manager position at their company. They were presented with the personality profile of a potential candidate, Jamie, which contained the same manipulation as in Study 1 (for full manipulation texts, see ESM 1). We used a one-item manipulation check, which allowed us to compare each condition's mean to a clear midpoint ("Considering what you have read about Jamie, to what extent would you describe Jamie as…", 1 = *cynical*; 4 = *neither cynical nor trusting*; 7 = *trusting*).

Preventing Antisocial Behavior and Encouraging Prosocial Behavior

These skills were measured with the same scales, as in Study 1, presented in randomized order (both α = .97).

Hiring Preference, Intended Salary, Perceived Manager Effectiveness

After reading the manager profile, participants were asked how likely they would be to hire the manager (1 = *not at all likely*; 7 = *very likely*), what annual salary they would pay this manager (starting from 1 = £50,000–£59,999 and increasing to 7 = £150,000–£169,999 in even increments), and how good they thought this manager would be at their job (four items, e.g., "I think that Jamie would make a good manager"; 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*; α = .96). All three measures were presented in randomized order.

Results

Correlations

Correlations between the main variables can be found in Table E2 (see ESM 1).

Manipulation Check

Participants in the cynical manager condition rated the manager as more cynical ($n = 124$, $M = 6.60$, $SD = 0.88$) than participants in the trusting manager condition ($n = 128$, $M = 1.47$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(250) = 42.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 5.41$, CI [4.87; 5.94]. One-sample t-tests showed that the means in both the cynical manager condition ($t(123) = 32.90$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.95$, CI [2.54; 3.36]) and the trusting manager condition ($t(127) = -28.32$, $p < .001$, $d = -2.50$, CI [−2.86; −2.15]) were significantly different from the neutral scale midpoint (4).

Perceptions of Manager Abilities

Participants judged the cynical manager as better at preventing antisocial behavior ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.48$) than the trusting manager ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.34$) ($t(250) = 9.22$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$, CI [0.89; 1.43]) and as worse at encouraging prosocial behavior ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.39$) than the trusting manager ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.19$) ($t(241) = -11.14$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.41$, CI [−1.68; −1.13]) (see Figure 5a, b).

Hiring Preference, Intended Salary, Perceived Manager Effectiveness

Participants indicated that they would be more likely to hire the trusting ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.69$) than the cynical manager ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.47$) ($t(247) = -7.58$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.95$, CI [−1.21; −0.69]). They also indicated they would pay the trusting manager a higher salary ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.08$) than the cynical manager ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.96$) ($t(249) = -2.96$, $p = .003$, $d = -0.37$, CI [−0.62; −0.12]). Finally, they expected that the trusting manager would be more effective at their job ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.52$) than the cynical manager ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.40$) ($t(249) = -7.51$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.95$, CI [−1.21; −0.68]) (see Figure 6a–c).

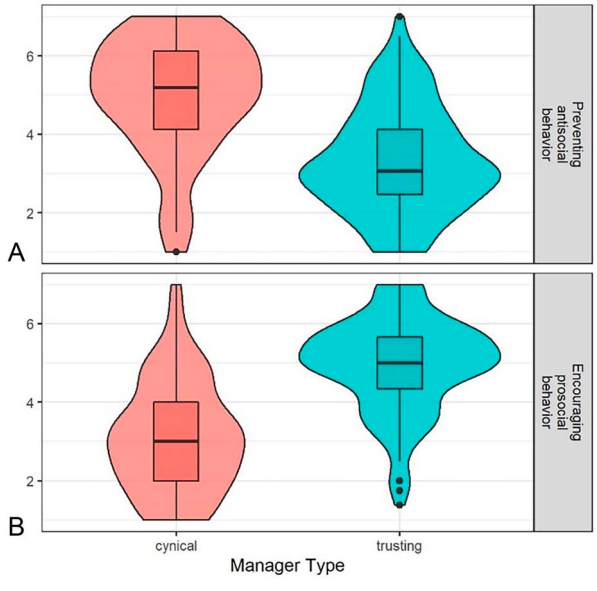

Figure 5. Study 2: Mean perceived ability to prevent antisocial behavior and encourage prosocial behavior of the trusting versus cynical manager. Violin plots indicate density distributions; boxplots indicate 25th and 75th quartiles.

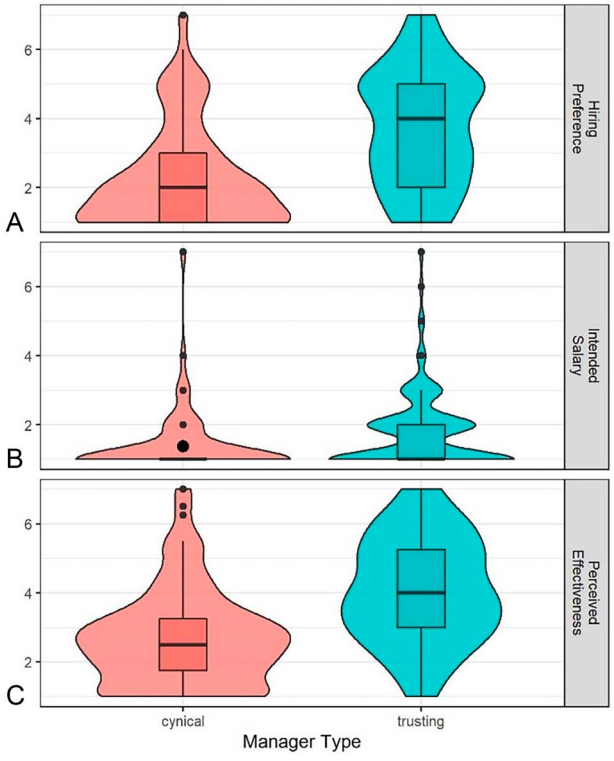

Figure 6. Study 2: Mean hiring preference (A), mean intended salary (B), and mean perceived effectiveness (C) of the trusting versus cynical manager. *Note*. Violin plots indicate density distributions; boxplots indicate 25th and 75th quartiles.

Mediation Analyses

We found that the cynical (vs. trusting) manager was perceived as better at preventing antisocial behavior and worse at encouraging prosocial behavior, both of which were in turn associated with stronger hiring preference (see Figure 7a). Both indirect effects (perceived ability to prevent antisocial behavior: 0.60, *SE* = 0.14, CI [0.36; 0.90] and perceived ability to encourage prosocial behavior: −0.98, *SE* = 0.15, CI [−1.28; −0.70]) were significant. However, a formal comparison showed a significant difference of 1.57 (CI [1.30; 1.88]) between the two, indicating that the indirect effect via perceived ability to encourage prosocial behavior was stronger.

The analyses of perceived manager effectiveness also provided support for both mediation paths (see Figure 7b; ability to prevent antisocial behavior (0.72, *SE* = 0.14, CI [0.47; 1.00]); ability to encourage prosocial behavior (−0.94, *SE* = 0.14, [CI −1.23; −0.68])). Formal comparisons indicated that the effect via ability to encourage prosocial behavior was stronger, with a difference of 1.66 (CI [1.41; 1.94]).

Finally, when looking at intended salary (see Figure 7c), the effect of manager type was mediated by the manager's perceived ability to encourage prosocial behavior (−0.31, *SE* = 0.15, CI [−0.60; −0.003]), while the indirect effect via perceived ability to prevent antisocial behavior did not reach significance (CI [−0.20; 0.30]). A formal comparison showed a difference of 0.36 (CI [0.16; 0.56]) between the two.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 indicated that, despite perceiving cynical managers as better at preventing antisocial behavior in their employees, participants had a weaker preference for hiring a cynical manager, offered them a lower salary, and perceived them as less effective at their job compared to a trusting manager. While both the ability to prevent antisocial behavior and the ability to encourage prosocial behavior at work positively predicted hiring outcomes for managers, the ability to encourage prosocial behavior was a stronger predictor, thereby resulting in an overall preference for trusting managers, who were seen as more skilled in this area. Thus, our findings support Hypothesis 3.2 over Hypothesis 3.1.

Notably, our mediation approach had a clear limitation: The mediators (ability to prevent antisocial behavior and ability to encourage prosocial behavior) were merely measured, rather than experimentally manipulated, thus restricting our ability to draw causal conclusions. To rectify this, in Study 3, we used a testing-a-process-hypothesis-by-an-interaction strategy (TPIS; Jacoby & Sassenberg, 2011). In this design, the hypothesized process is tested through the interaction between the cause of an effect (here, manager cynicism) and a contextual variable that interrupts the causal process by creating conditions where the causal effect can be expected to be either stronger or weaker. We therefore introduced a contextual variable – importance placed on the ability of a manager to prevent antisocial behavior – that either strengthens (high importance) or reduces (low importance) the causal effect of manager cynicism on hiring outcomes.

Study 3

Since cynical managers were seen as better at preventing antisocial behavior in Studies 1 and 2, we expected that having to hire someone for a position that requires this skill would result in a reduction, or even a reversal, of the preference for trusting over cynical managers (Hypothesis 4). We tested this hypothesis using a 2 × 2 between-subjects design where we manipulated manager type (cynical vs. trusting), as well as the manager's task (preventing antisocial behavior vs. neutral).

Participants

An initial power analysis (see the sample size section of the pre-registration) indicated that a minimum of 351

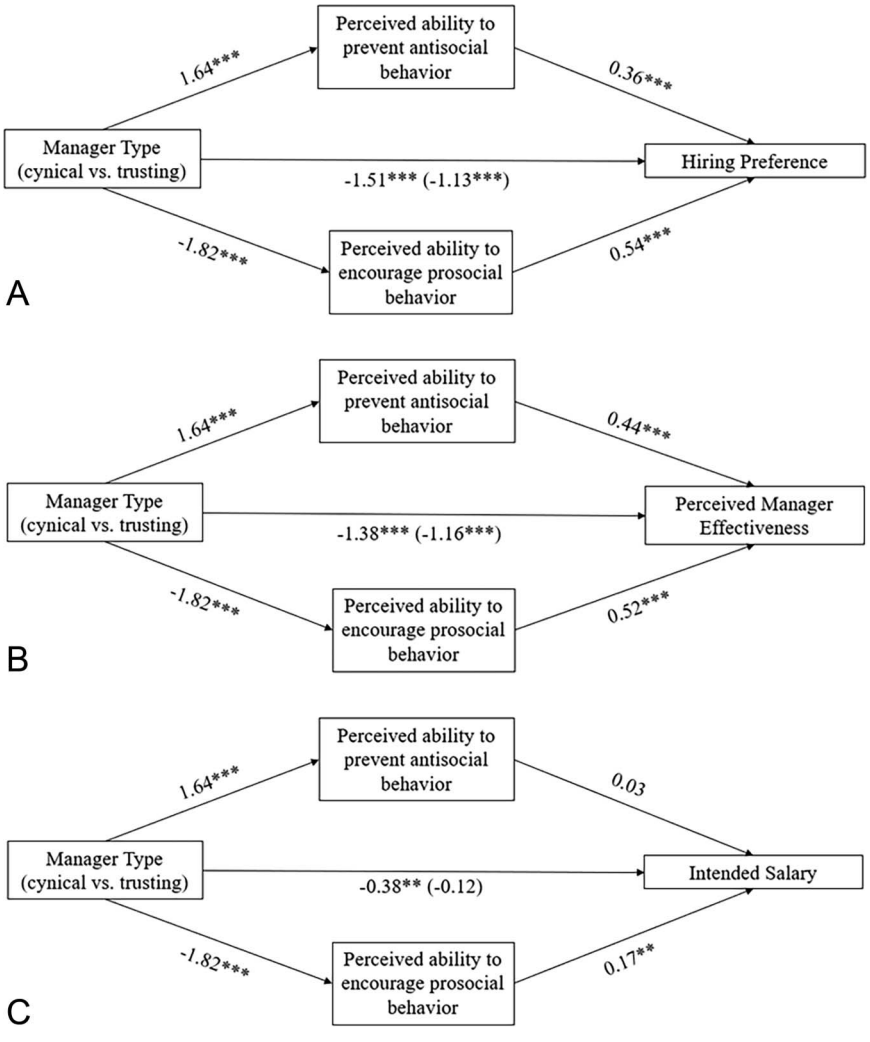

Figure 7. Study 2: Mediation analyses with unstandardized coefficients. Effect of manager type on hiring preference, perceived manager effectiveness, and intended salary, mediated by perceived ability to prevent antisocial behavior and perceived ability to encourage prosocial behavior. ***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p < .05$. Manager type: 1 = *cynical*, 0 = *trusting*. Direct effect in brackets.

participants would be needed. To compensate for participants failing the attention check, we recruited a total of 406 employed participants via Prolific. People who had already participated in Studies 1 or 2 were not invited to participate. Eleven participants failed the attention check, resulting in a final sample of $N = 395$ (206 women, 187 men, 1 nonbinary, 1 gender fluid), with an average age of 38.01 ($SD = 10.5$).

Materials and Procedure

The procedure and materials for Study 3 were nearly identical to those for Study 2, with two exceptions: First, before participants were presented with the summary of Jamie's personality profile, they were either told that the department Jamie was to be hired for had a high incidence of antisocial behavior (*preventing antisocial behavior condition*) or they were not given this information (*neutral task condition*); for full manipulation texts, see ESM 1). Second, we changed the intended salary item to reflect verbal, rather than numerical, descriptions of salary size[4] ("The company has a scale of possible salaries for managers. If you were to hire Jamie, what salary would you offer them?" 1 = *lowest possible salary*; 4 = *average salary*; 7 = *highest possible salary*).

Results

Correlations

Correlations between the main variables can be found in Table E3 (see ESM 1).

[4] The original item resulted in a skewed distribution of responses (see ESM 1).

Manipulation Check

Participants in the cynical manager condition (n = 200) rated the manager as more cynical (M = 6.55, SD = 0.88) than participants in the trusting manager condition (n = 194; M = 1.46, SD = 1.01), $t(392)$ = 53.07, p < .001, d = 5.45, CI [4.92; 5.77]. One-sample t-tests showed that the means in both the cynical manager condition ($t(199)$ = 40.71, p < .001, d = 2.88, CI [2.56; 3.19]) and the trusting manager condition ($t(193)$ = −34.85, p < .001, d = −2.50, CI [−2.79; −2.22]) were significantly different from the neutral scale midpoint (4).

Hiring Preference

A 2 (manager type: cynical vs. trusting) × 2 (task: preventing antisocial behavior vs. neutral) between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of manager type [$F(1, 391)$ = 90.87, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.19] on hiring preference, such that participants preferred hiring the trusting manager (M = 4.02, SD = 1.68) over the cynical manager (M = 2.52, SD = 1.47). There was no significant main effect of task (p = .136) on hiring preference. More importantly, we found the expected interaction effect between manager type and task [$F(1, 391)$ = 27.84, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.07]: When no additional information about the manager's tasks was provided (n = 198), participants strongly preferred hiring the trusting manager (M = 4.34, SD = 1.48) over the cynical manager (M = 2.06, SD = 1.26) [$F(1, 391)$ = 109.66, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.22]. However, when the manager's tasks involved the prevention of antisocial behavior (n = 197), this preference for hiring the trusting (M = 3.76, SD = 1.80) over the cynical manager (M = 3.10, SD = 1.51) was weaker [$F(1, 391)$ = 9.05, p = .003, η_p^2 = 0.02] (see Figure 8).

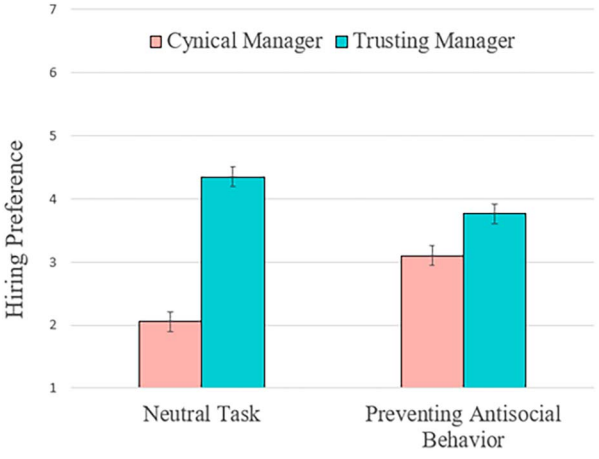

Figure 8. Study 3: Hiring preference for the trusting versus cynical manager across task conditions. *Note*. Error bars indicate standard error.

Intended Salary

Running the same ANOVA with intended salary as the outcome variable revealed a significant main effect of manager type [$F(1, 391)$ = 55.12, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.12], such that participants would offer the trusting manager a higher salary (M = 4.08, SD = 1.10) than the cynical manager (M = 3.19, SD = 1.25). We also found a main effect of task [$F(1, 391)$ = 4.26, p = .040, η_p^2 = 0.01], such that managers whose tasks involved the prevention of antisocial behavior were offered a higher salary (M = 3.79, SD = 1.17) than those whose tasks were not specified (M = 3.46, SD = 1.33). More importantly, we again found an interaction effect between manager type and task [$F(1, 391)$ = 15.02, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.04], such that, when no additional information about the manager's tasks was provided, participants indicated they would pay the trusting manager (M = 4.19, SD = 0.99) more than the cynical manager (M = 2.87, SD = 1.27) [$F(1, 391)$ = 63.85, p < .001 η_p^2 = 0.14]. However, when the manager's tasks involved the prevention of antisocial behavior, the intended salary gap between the trusting (M = 3.98, SD = 1.18) and the cynical manager (M = 3.57, SD = 1.12) was smaller [$F(1, 391)$ = 6.30, p = .013, η_p^2 = 0.02] (see Figure 9).

Perceived Manager Effectiveness

Finally, we found a significant main effect of manager type [$F(1, 391)$ = 142.54, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.27] on perceived effectiveness of the manager, such that trusting managers were perceived as more effective (M = 4.42, SD = 1.34) than cynical managers (M = 2.75, SD = 1.45). There was also a significant main effect of task [$F(1, 391)$ = 7.41, p = .007, η_p^2 = 0.02], indicating that managers whose tasks focused on the prevention of antisocial behavior were perceived as more effective

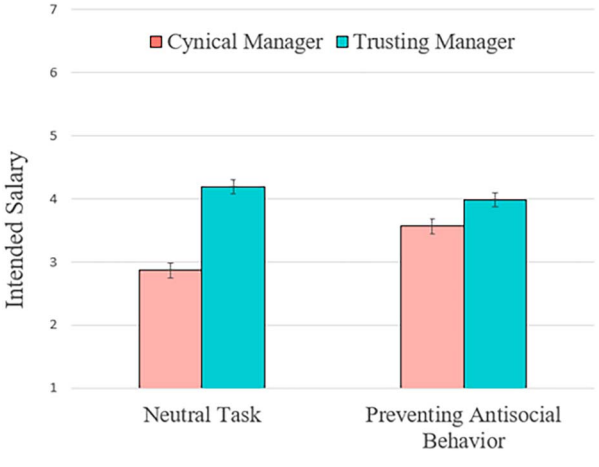

Figure 9. Study 3: Intended salary for the trusting versus cynical manager across task conditions. *Note*. Error bars indicate standard error.

(M = 3.84, SD = 1.51), than those with unspecified tasks (M = 3.30, SD = 1.70). More importantly, we found the expected interaction effect between manager type and task [$F(1, 391) = 21.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$], indicating that, when no additional information about the manager's tasks was provided, participants saw the trusting manager (M = 4.56, SD = 1.22) as much more effective than the cynical manager (M = 2.30, SD = 1.31) [$F(1, 391) = 137.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.26$]. However, when the manager's tasks involved the prevention of antisocial behavior, this difference in perceived effectiveness for the trusting (M = 4.30, SD = 1.42) versus the cynical manager (M = 3.30, SD = 1.43) was smaller [$F(1, 391) = 26.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$] (see Figure 10). The alternative contrasts (i.e., the effect of task as a function of manager type) for all three variables can be found in the ESM 1.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 provided support for Hypothesis 4, namely that hiring outcomes for cynical (vs. trusting) managers are affected by the manager's tasks. Specifically, when the manager's job description explicitly involved the prevention of antisocial behavior in their employees, the preference for trusting managers over cynical managers (in terms of hiring, intended salary, and perceived manager effectiveness) was significantly reduced. Nevertheless, the overall preference for trusting managers persisted, indicating that, although cynical managers might be seen as a relatively better fit for environments that require a more cynical approach, this is not sufficient to increase their employability vis-a-vis trusting managers.

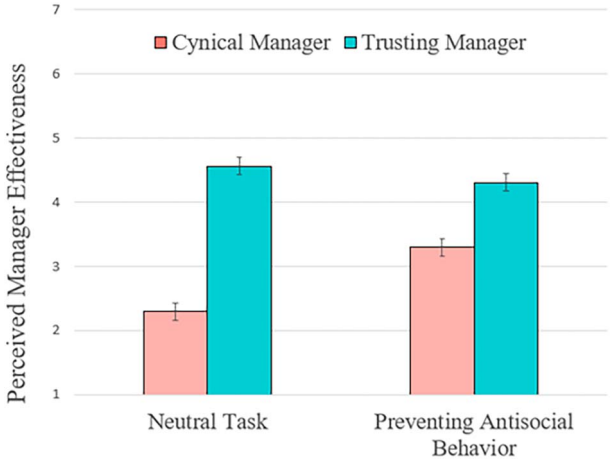

Figure 10. Study 3: Perceived manager effectiveness of the trusting versus cynical manager across task conditions. *Note*. Error bars indicate standard error.

General Discussion

Prior research has revealed multiple adverse consequences of cynicism in organizational contexts, such that cynics experience lower job satisfaction, have fewer career prospects, engage in more knowledge hiding behavior and increased workplace incivility, and exhibit reduced employee loyalty (Aljawarneh & Atan, 2018; Smith et al., 1988). But is there a "bright side" to cynicism, in the form of reputational benefits? The results of our three experiments suggest that the answer to this question is twofold. On the one hand, in Study 1, we found that people perceive cynical leaders as better at preventing antisocial behavior in their employees, such as lying, stealing, and taking advantage of the organization, than trusting leaders. This was explained by the belief that cynical (vs. trusting) leaders are better at detecting such behaviors and more punitive of them. At the same time, people viewed cynical leaders as worse at encouraging their employees to engage in prosocial behavior at work, such as expressing loyalty to, actively contributing to the development of, or defending the organization. In Study 2, we investigated how these perceptions would translate into hiring preferences for cynical leaders. The results showed that being able to encourage prosocial behavior was a better predictor of hiring outcomes, resulting in a lower preference for cynical leaders: Cynical leaders were less likely to get hired, were offered a lower salary, and were seen as less effective than their more trusting counterparts. Finally, Study 3 indicated that the demand for cynical leaders increases as preventing antisocial behavior becomes more important: When hiring someone for a leadership position in a department known for high incidences of antisocial behavior, the gap in hiring outcomes between the cynical and trusting leader was smaller: Trusting leaders were still more likely to get hired, were offered higher salaries, and were seen as more effective, but this was significantly reduced in situations where a more distrustful attitude was necessary.

Theoretical Implications

Our research offers novel insights into both the benefits and the drawbacks of being perceived as cynical. Previous research on lay beliefs about cynicism found that people view cynics as especially smart and competent (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2019b). We add to this finding by demonstrating that the positive reputational consequences of cynicism extend to the perceived ability of cynics to detect antisocial behavior and consequently prevent others from engaging in it. These abilities represent an important skillset in organizations and the fact that lay people attribute them to cynical leaders more so than to trusting leaders might explain why cynicism, despite having a negative impact on organizations

in general (Andersson & Bateman, 1997), might be tolerated in certain organizational contexts, or for certain positions. Prior research on moral attitudes has shown that people tend to perceive the world as steadily getting worse, due to, for example, moral degradation, increased selfishness, and violence (Eibach & Libby, 2009). It is possible that these biased perceptions of social decline contribute to the perceived usefulness of cynicism (as opposed to trust) as a force that can counteract such developments.

Beyond adding to our knowledge on the reputational consequences of cynicism, our findings also contribute to the broader literature on lay beliefs and their consequences. We offer a theoretical contribution by extending rational choice theory and applying it to the prediction of lay beliefs about the deterrence of antisocial behavior. Furthermore, we add to prior work that emphasized the importance of lay beliefs about personality in predicting various behaviors – such as prosociality (Stavrova et al., 2022), social exclusion (Rudert et al., 2021), and risk-taking behavior (Cooper et al., 2015), as well as personnel selection (Highhouse, 2008), and the subsequent treatment of employees (Heslin et al., 2006) – by showing how beliefs about a specific trait (cynicism) can influence hiring outcomes, through triggering associations with specific skills, or lack thereof. Our results indicate that overall, (perceived) cynicism is more likely to undermine one's chances of getting hired for leadership positions. This is important, as it is possible that, conversely, being stuck in one's career could render someone more cynical. Indeed, studies on cynical hostility have shown that the experience of being laid off can contribute to the development of a cynical worldview (Hakulinen et al., 2013). Thus, cynical individuals' hiring outcomes might predispose them to a vicious cycle, in which their cynicism is reinforced over time. Future research would benefit from further investigating the possibility of such bidirectional effects and their long-term consequences.

Limitations and Future Directions

We found that people's preference for trusting over cynical leaders was reduced when the leadership position required the ability to prevent antisocial behavior. This indicates that situational factors, such as a high incidence of antisocial behavior within a department, affect people's hiring preferences for cynical leaders. Nevertheless, people still did not opt to hire a cynical leader over a trusting one when the situation ostensibly demanded it. One possible explanation for this is that our situational manipulation was not strong enough to trigger a reversal of preferences. While the scenario people were put in placed them directly inside the company, their placement in HR could have seemed too distant compared to if they had been placed in the fictional department itself. In other words, the personal stakes of not hiring a person who could put an end to the rampant antisocial behaviors in the department might have been too low. It is possible that presenting participants with a scenario in which they are explicitly harmed by the antisocial behavior of other employees (as either their colleague or direct superior) might increase the perceived importance of the ability to prevent this behavior, resulting in a relative preference for a cynical (over a trusting) leader and thus overruling the perceived drawbacks of such a candidate. Future research might benefit from testing this possibility by varying the extent to which participants are directly affected by others' antisocial behavior in different positions in the company.

Finally, we acknowledge that our findings are limited by the experimental nature of our studies. While our approach provided a high level of experimental control and allowed us to parse out differences in individual perceptions of cynical and trusting leaders, this also resulted in a trade-off with external validity, such that the generalizability of our findings to real workplaces is limited. Although we ensured that our participants had at least some experience working in organizations – and thus may have had real experiences with cynical or trusting leaders – our results cannot speak to how factors, such as employees' shared history, work in teams, or particular organizational climate, might additionally influence how they experience and perceive cynicism in real-life leader–follower interactions. Future research might therefore benefit from replicating our findings by asking employees to recall previous interactions with cynical leaders or using observational data from the field.

Conclusion

The present research provides a first step in exploring the perceived benefits and drawbacks of cynical leaders in organizational environments. Our results suggest that people consider cynical leaders useful, insofar as they are perceived as better able to prevent their subordinates from engaging in harmful or antisocial behaviors than trusting leaders. Nevertheless, these benefits appear to be limited, as cynicism is also considered antithetical to being able to encourage and inspire one's subordinates. Thus, while people might intuitively agree with Benjamin Franklin and Donald T. Campbell, who touted the functionality of a cynical worldview, they typically do not want to see this worldview being endorsed by their leaders.

Electronic Supplementary Material

The electronic supplementary material is available with the online version of the article at https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000528

ESM 1. This file contains full manipulation texts and correlation tables for each study along with additional exploratory analyses.

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Authorship
Teodora Spiridonova: conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review & editing; Olga Stavrova: conceptualization; methodology; supervision; writing – review & editing; Anthony Evans: conceptualization; methodology; supervision; writing – review & editing; Ilja van Beest: conceptualization; methodology; supervision; writing – review & editing. All authors approved the final version of the article.

Open Data
The information needed to reproduce all of the reported results is available at https://osf.io/fcrs4/?view_only=28315b020df741e3a400fb13b10b219d (Spiridonova et al., 2023).

Open Materials: The information needed to reproduce all of the reported methodology is available at https://osf.io/fcrs4/?view_only=28315b020df741e3a400fb13b10b219d (Spiridonova et al., 2023).

Pre-registration and Analysis Plan: The three studies were preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/D56_LQR; https://aspredicted.org/9ZX_LC3; https://aspredicted.org/2C1_HPP

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