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In Leaders We Trust: Investigating the relationship between error type and frequency on
perceived leader trustworthiness

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the impact that leader error has on perceptions of trust within the leader-follower relationship. Data was collected from 329 undergraduate students at The Pennsylvania State University, who were given course credit in their introductory psychology course in exchange for participation. This cross-sectional vignette study utilized Mayer and Davis's (1999) trustworthiness scales to measure the impact of leader errors on participants. Results show that perceptions of leader ability were significantly lower after task errors were committed, in comparison to relational errors or no errors. When analyzing data surrounding relational errors, it was found that perceptions of benevolence did not differ following task or relational errors, although perceptions were significantly lower than when no errors were committed. Perceptions of leader ability were found to have decreased the most following task errors; perceptions of leader ability were highest following a relational error when compared to no errors committed and only a task error committed. Data also shows that as errors are repeated, all facets of trust towards leaders decreased. No support was found for an interaction between error type and error repetition. Implications of this research build upon the present knowledge base and inform industry on the impacts of leader error.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“To err is human, to persist in error is diabolical.” – Seneca (attributed)

Simply put, leaders make mistakes. Even when the stakes are high and preparations have been made, errors are bound to occur. Leaders play crucial roles in organizations, and their actions have consequences not only linked to themselves, but also their followers. Leader mistakes, no matter how often they occur, have major impact: a 2012 report by Gallup found that 70% of the variance in employee engagement is explained by poor leadership (Beck & Harter, n.d.). Given the impact that leader errors have, it is crucial that we understand how and when leader mistakes affect followers.

Previous research has focused on isolated leader errors, both task and relational, and their consequences (Follmer et al., 2019). If leadership is poorly perceived, the impact reaches the entire business, and the outcomes are extremely pervasive. Negative outcomes linked to leader errors include decreased performance and negative evaluations of leader effectiveness on behalf of followers, indicating that everyone feels the effects of a leader mistake, not just the leader themselves (Eubanks & Mumford, 2010; Thoroughgood, Sawyer, & Hunter, 2012). Moreover, when a leader makes a mistake and stressors form, leaders may compromise their own decision-making skills by reverting to behaviors that affirm what they believe in, therefore leading to more errors and overall judgement clouding (Hunter et al., 2011). As a result of judgement clouding, leader trust may also decrease, which weakens the strength of the leader-follower relationship (Lapidot et al., 2007). These findings illuminate the nature of leader error

consequences and highlight the impact that they have on followers, but there is much left to be explored within the context of error specificities.

Taken together, research suggests that singular leader errors are impactful to followers, but there is a gap in the logic regarding why some errors lead to negative judgement and outcomes, and others do not. Existing literature also fails to address how followers perceive *multiple* instances of leader mistakes. Repeated leader errors are at times seen as a reflection of poor leadership and performance in a leadership role, and when an error is repeated, it may illuminate a lack of care on behalf of a leader, more than an accidental and singular mistake would. This lack of care on behalf of the leader may also lead to a lack of trust on behalf of the followers, which the current literature fails to address. When leaders lack ability, benevolence, and integrity, trust diminishes, but existing literature has not explored the impact of these factors on followership (Mayer & Davis, 1999). Repeated leader errors also may lead to higher perceptions of unethicity, whereas a single error may be viewed as an accident (Jones, 1991). To examine the effects of leader error type and frequency on follower perceptions of leaders, we test our predictions using a vignette-based study.

Our study offers three main contributions to the literature on leader errors. By studying the influence of repeated leader errors, we aim to develop a more nuanced view of leader perceptions post-error, given that repeated leader errors are directly linked to the very real consequences of leader mistakes, a facet of leadership that affects leaders and followers alike. We also aim to gain a more refined understanding of follower perceptions of leaders when errors made range in perceived ethicality. Our study aims to better describe everyday leadership behaviors and heighten the applicability of knowledge within the field to the world outside of the

research, by studying meaningful, real-world scenarios.

Chapter 2

Theory and Hypotheses

Defining leader errors

Being able to work effectively and having the ability to demonstrate strong decision-making skills are fundamentally important when in a leadership role. Leaders employ these skills when guiding a group toward success, although things do not always go as planned. In scenarios where extraneous factors alter the nature of a situation, or a leader fails to use strong decision-making skills, leader errors may occur. Although leader errors are usually identified and defined in retrospect given that they cannot often be predicted, more recent literature discusses that some errors may be systematic and predictable depending on the nature of the task or leader's propensity to err (Eubanks & Mumford, 2010). In other words, errors in leadership are failures that can often be avoided. As such, the official working definition in the field states that leader errors are "(1) decisions and behaviors that result in an undesirable gap between an expected and real state and (2) may lead to actual or potential negative consequences for organizational functioning that could have been avoided" (Zhao & Olivera, 2006, p. 1013). Not limited in size or scope, leader errors can range from a one-time error to a pattern of errors that develops into a larger issue within the organization. The effects of leader errors, however, depend in part on the types of errors committed.

How do leader errors relate to other aspects of leadership?

The literature divides tasks and their associated errors into two categories: task and relational (Yukl, 2013). Task-based behaviors involve more concrete behaviors and refer to "a leader's management of work-completion in an organization", whereas relational behaviors are more emotionally based and involve building supportive relationships with group members

(Hetrick et al., 2021). Effectively structuring tasks and appealing to followers' needs and emotions are vital for guiding and motivating followers (Giessner & Knippenberg, 2008). In other words, leaders' task and relational performance lay the foundation for trusting leader-follower relationships and allow the leader to have influence over followers (Giessner & Knippenberg, 2008). Given that influence over others is a defining component of leadership, building and maintaining trust is therefore critical for leadership (Giessner & Knippenberg, 2008).

Trust following leader errors

Trust is an integral component of leader-follower relationships that can easily be lost when errors occur. Defined as “willingness to be vulnerable to a trustee based on positive expectations about the trustee’s actions and intentions”, an individual's trustworthiness is comprised of three components: ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer & Davis, 1999). Ability looks at the actual hard and soft skills that someone has for meeting task demands. At a baseline level, to trust someone to do something, you must have confidence that they are aware of the correct action to take. Benevolence is defined as the “belief that the authority wants to do good for the trustor” (Mayer & Davis, 1999). In other words, the person being trusted must be believed to have the follower's best interest at heart. Finally, to be trustworthy, someone must also have integrity; they must be perceived as having a set of “values and principles” that they follow (Mayer & Davis, 1999). Those who are perceived as high in ability, benevolence, and integrity are trusted the most.

When a leader makes a mistake at work, followers may lose their trust in the leader’s capabilities, actions, and intentions. The types of trust compromised, however, may vary depending on the type of error committed. Task related errors can “undermine competence-based

trust, which is the perception of technical skills, experience, and reliability that are needed to fulfill obligations” (Hetrick et al., 2021). Relational error outcomes “undermine integrity-based trust, which comes from positive beliefs about motives, honesty, and character” (Hetrick et al., 2021). Additionally, relational leadership errors can also influence levels of benevolence. When a leader performs a relational leadership error with direct impacts on the follower, the follower may no longer believe that the leader is acting in their best interest (Mayer & Davis, 1999). While task related errors may more heavily impact perceptions of leader ability, relational errors may more strongly alter views on leader integrity and benevolence.

H1a: Task errors result in lower perceptions of trust in the leader’s ability than no errors and relational errors

H1b: Relational errors result in lower perceptions of trust in the leader’s benevolence than no errors or task errors.

H1c: Relational errors result in lower perceptions of trust in the leader’s integrity than no errors or task errors.

Research has examined single leader errors but not repeated errors

Existing research remains focused on single leader errors, yet repeated leader errors are an extremely common facet of leader mistakes. It is understood that single leader errors lead to outcomes that trickle down to effect followers. It is presumed that a repeated error would compromise trust more so, given the replicative nature of the action. Moreover, responses to repeated leader errors may be different, and the lines between incompetence and unethicity may come into question.

Implications of repeated leader errors

Multiple errors being committed from a single leader can form disputes over whether a leader is fit for their job. Further, their actions can alter job prospects of their followers, who potentially face consequences based on separate actions of their leader. Although an initial error may be seen as a mistake, multiple errors may cause attributional shifts. A leader is comprised of their actions, and when their actions are error-ridden, followers may shift from attributing errors to outside factors, to attributing errors to the leader themselves. On a broad level, blame may be placed on the leader for committing repeated errors, whereas a single error may be attributed to external factors.

How do repeated errors relate to perceptions of trust?

On a more personal level, repeated actions may be construed as unethical. A singular error may be viewed as a mistake, but when an error is repeated, some may view it as purposeful action, and trust towards the leader may be lowered. Repeated errors show a lack of desire to learn and correct actions, resulting in innately consequential impacts on the leader-follower relationship. At the core of trust is the idea that someone is willing to take a risk for another person (Mayer & Davis, 1999). When a leader makes an error that leads to diminishing trust from followers, less risks are taken, actions are not performed, and objectives are not met. For a single task error, it might be that the leader gave unclear direction and guidance to followers on tasks or ineffectively managed social dynamics. Yet, when the error is repeated, the leader exhibits not only a lack of competence, but additionally, a lack of care or desire to learn from mistakes.

H2: Repeated errors result in lower perceptions of trust in the leader's ability, integrity, and benevolence than single errors.

How do task type and repetition interact?

Realistically, leader errors are often not uniform in type and repetition—errors individually vary in what is occurring, how often they occur, and the impact that they have. Although leader errors are displayed in a plethora of ways, they are not all created equal. This inequality in error magnitude results in varying impact of errors on follower trust. Likewise, differing leader errors impact facets of trust in unique ways. Repeated errors, given their repetitive nature, have the capability to leave more severe consequences on integrity, benevolence, and trust. For example, when a task error is repeated, followers may begin to think that leaders are careless and show no concern for learning, correcting course, and avoiding the negative consequences of their mistakes for their constituents. Accordingly, repeated task errors would result in lower trust in a leader's ability, integrity, and benevolence. Likewise, repeatedly committing relational errors may give followers the impression that a leader fundamentally does not care to support their team's emotional needs (i.e., integrity- and benevolence-based trust), which may be counterproductive to task completion later on (i.e., task-based trust). Regardless of error type, a repeated error may result in followers attributing the errors to the leader's ability and personality, rather than the social or task context. As a result, repeated errors may have the capability more quickly decrease levels of trust, lowering confidence in all three components of trust.

H3: Error type and repetition interact, such that perceptions of leader ability, integrity, and benevolence a) do not differ by error type when errors are repeated and b) are lowest when errors are repeated.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Sample and Design

Data were collected from 329 undergraduates from a large northeastern university who were given course credit in their introductory psychology course in exchange for participation. We removed 97 number of cases for failing manipulation tests, leaving a final sample of 232. The mean age of participants was 18.8 years. Participants included 76.3% women, 23.3% men, and 0.4% nonbinary individuals. For this study, participants were told to imagine themselves in a hypothetical leadership scenario and asked to rate their perceptions about their leader's mistakes. Participants were randomly assigned into one of four leader error conditions in a 2 (task vs. relational errors) x2 (single vs. repeated errors) design.

Procedure

The study took place on an online survey. Participants filled out a series of demographic and individual difference questionnaires. Then, participants were asked to imagine that they were working as an employee in an organization called Smith and Co., a medium-sized company. Participants were told that they have worked for Smith and Co. for 6 months, and that so far, they enjoy their job and have not had any issues with anyone in the company. As part of their job, they have been placed on a project team with seven other co-workers, led by their immediate supervisor. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions corresponding to the type of error (task vs. relational) and the persistence of errors (single/one-off vs. repeated).

For the task errors, participants were told that their team has been tasked with creating deliverables for All Stuff, a large, high-profile company whose partnership would greatly benefit Smith and Co. If All Stuff likes your deliverables and agrees to a partnership, your company,

Smith and Co., could double its revenue, and your team's efforts will be seen as a major success. However, if All Stuff finds your deliverables unsatisfactory and decides against partnering, Smith and Co. could be in financial trouble. Participants were then told that either their boss does not show up for one important meeting with All Stuff, forcing the team to lead the presentation for All Stuff completely unprepared, or that one day, their boss gave the team the wrong financial sheet, which causes the team to miscalculate important information for a project with All Stuff.

For the relational errors, participants were told that their team has been tasked with creating deliverables for All Stuff, a large, high-profile company whose partnership would greatly benefit Smith and Co. If All Stuff likes your deliverables and agrees to a partnership, your company, Smith and Co., could double its revenue, and your team's efforts will be seen as a major success. However, if All Stuff finds your deliverables unsatisfactory and decides against partnering, Smith and Co. could be in financial trouble. In one relational error condition, participants were then told that one day, their team submits a deliverable to their boss for one last look-over. The deliverable is not what their boss expected, causing their boss to criticize the participant and their team in front of other Smith and Co. employees at one point in the meeting. In the second relational error condition, participants were told that in a private meeting, you disclose to their boss that you have had a family emergency come up. However, one day, your boss asks you to work overtime to complete the presentation, forcing to make a one-time decision between prioritizing work and your ongoing family emergency. For each type of error, participants were informed whether the error occurred once or multiple times. Finally, after reading about their leadership scenarios, participants were asked to respond to a series of items about their leadership perceptions.

Measures and Manipulation Checks

To determine the trustworthiness of followers to leaders' post-error, scales from Mayer & Davis (1999) were used. Trustworthiness was measured in three facets: ability, integrity, and benevolence. Participants rated statements on a 5-point scale that ranged from "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree". Sample items for ability were: "I believe [manager name] is very capable of performing their job" and "I believe [manager name] is known to be successful at the things they try to do". The Cronbach's α for this scale was .89. Sample items for integrity were: "I believe [manager name] sees my needs and desires as very important: and "I believe [manager name] would not knowingly do anything to hurt me". The Cronbach's α for this scale was .85. Sample items for benevolence were: "I believe [manager name] will try to be fair in dealing with others" and "I believe [manager name] will act consistently". The Cronbach's α for this scale was .87.

To test whether the experimental manipulations yielded their intended effects, a one-way ANOVA comparing perceptions of task and relational errors across error type groups, and perceived number of leader mistakes across the error repetition groups was completed. As expected, perceptions of task errors and relational errors differed across experimental groups, $F_{task}(2,111) = 47.90, p < .001$, and $F_{relational}(2,131) = 42.00, p < .001$. Specifically, perceptions of task errors were higher in the task error condition ($M = 4.37, SE = .12$) than in the control condition ($M = 2.80, SE = .20$), $p < .001$, and in the relational condition ($M = 3.10, SE = .10$), $p < .001$. Similarly, perceptions of relational errors were higher in the relational error condition ($M = 3.46, SE = .12$) than in the control condition ($M = 1.76, SE = .14$), $p < .001$, and in the task error condition ($M = 2.73, SE = .15$), $p < .001$.

Furthermore, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to ensure that participants reported seeing more mistakes committed in the repeated errors condition as compared to the single error condition. Indeed, number of leader mistakes was higher in the repeated error condition ($M = 3.55, SE = .12$) than in the single error condition ($M = 2.35, SE = .12$), $F(1,226) = 50.00, p < .001$. In sum, experimental manipulations for error types and error repetition produced the appropriate effects.

Chapter 4

Results

Hypothesis 1a predicted that perceptions of leader ability would be lower after task errors in comparison to relational errors or no errors. The omnibus F-test for a one-way ANOVA showed that conditions did differ in ability perceptions, $F(2,118) = 41.90, p < .001$. Results of the Games-Howell post-hoc test indicate that perceptions of ability were significantly lower for task errors ($M = 2.43, SE = .09$) than relational errors ($M = 3.40, SE = .07$), $t(154) = 8.32, p < .001$, or no errors ($M = 3.52, SE = .10$), $t(110) = 7.85, p < .001$ (see *Figure 1*). Thus, Hypothesis 1a was supported.

Hypothesis 1b predicted that perceptions of leader ability would be lowest after relational errors as compared to task errors or no errors. The omnibus F-test for a one-way ANOVA showed that conditions did differ in ability perceptions, $F(2,126) = 19.00, p < .001$ (see *Figure 1*). Results of the Games-Howell post-hoc test indicate that perceptions of benevolence were not significantly different following relational errors ($M = 2.48, SE = .08$) than task errors ($M = 2.33, SE = .09$), $t(174) = 1.20, p = .456$, but significantly lower than no errors ($M = 3.12, SE = .10$), $t(102) = 5.02, p < .001$ (see *Figure 2*). Given that relational and task errors resulted in comparable perceptions of leader ability that were both lower than in the control condition, only partial support was found for Hypothesis 1b.

Similar to Hypothesis 1b, Hypothesis 1c predicted that perceptions of leader ability would be lowest after relational errors (compared to task errors or no errors). The omnibus F-test for a one-way ANOVA showed that conditions did differ in ability perceptions, $F(2,120) = 32.80, p < .001$ (see *Figure 1*). Results of the Games-Howell post-hoc test indicate that perceptions of integrity following relational errors ($M = 2.91, SE = .07$) were significantly higher

than task errors ($M = 2.34$, $SE = .08$), $t(169) = 5.43$, $p < .001$, but lower than no errors ($M = 3.34$, $SE = .10$), $t(88) = 3.66$, $p = .001$. Although perceptions of integrity were lower in the relational error condition than in the control condition, perceptions of integrity were lowest for task errors (see *Figure 3*). As such, Hypothesis 1c was only partially supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that error repetition would diminish followers' perceptions of leader trustworthiness (i.e., belief in the leader's ability, benevolence, and integrity). Indeed, the omnibus F-test for a one-way ANOVA comparing single versus multiple errors shows that followers perceive leaders as having lower ability when they err repeatedly ($M = 3.31$, $SE = .08$) compared to singular mistakes ($M = 2.87$, $SE = .08$), $F(1,227) = 15.28$, $p < .001$ (see *Figure 1*). Likewise, perceptions of leader benevolence were lower after a leader committed multiple errors ($M = 2.72$, $SE = .08$) than single errors ($M = 2.40$, $SE = .08$), $F(1,228) = 9.00$, $p = .003$ (see *Figure 2*). Similar results were found for integrity, such that followers reported leaders as having lower integrity when errors were repeated ($M = 2.92$, $SE = .08$) as opposed to singular ($M = 2.67$, $SE = .07$), $F(1,223) = 6.08$, $p = .014$ (see *Figure 3*). It must be noted, however, that this effect was relatively weak.

Last, Hypothesis 3 predicted that error type and error repetition would interact, such that repetition would mute the differences between followers' perceptions of leader trustworthiness across error types. In contrast to Hypothesis 3, however, no significant interactions were found for perceived leader ability ($F(2,225) = .05$, $p = .955$), benevolence, ($F(2,225) = .42$, $p = .660$), or integrity ($F(2,225) = 1.16$, $p = .315$) (see *Figure 1, 2, & 3*). Hence, no support was found for Hypothesis 3.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect that leader error type has on facets of trust—ability, integrity, and benevolence. According to study results, perceptions of leader ability were significantly lower after task errors were committed, in comparison to relational errors or no errors. When analyzing data surrounding relational errors, it was found that perceptions of benevolence did not differ following task or relational errors, although perceptions were significantly lower than when no errors are committed. Perceptions of leader ability were found to have decreased the most following task errors; perceptions of leader ability were highest following a relational error when compared to no errors committed and only a task error committed. Data also shows that as errors are repeated, all facets of trust towards leaders decreased. No support was found for interaction between error type and error repetition.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results suggest that task errors carry more negative weight when influencing facets of trust when compared to relational errors. With the stark differences in impact stemming from task and relational errors, it may be implied that task errors are more meaningful to followers when compared to relational errors. This is, of course, an area that needs further study and analyzation.

It has been said that in the workplace, task related skills can be taught, but personality and relationship-building abilities cannot. The current study results suggest that regardless of the validity of this statement, task skills may be more impactful than relational skills. Setting up leaders for success with extensive training and ongoing resources may be extremely beneficial for proceeding perceptions of leader trust, pending the magnitude of errors made by leaders.

Limitations

Although our findings are secure, our study is not without its limitations. As with any vignette-based study, we built strong psychological realism, where participants were through the situation that they were later asked about. The downside to vignette-based studies, however, is that although participant perceptions of the situations are real, they are taken outside of real-work context. This may limit the generalizability of the study given that the leader in question is a “paper person” as opposed to an actual human.

Further, the sample of study participants who had worked full-time jobs was extremely small, so full screening of participants was not able to be completed. Completed data sets from this study include participants who have and have not worked full-time jobs prior to participating in the study. Additionally, most data were collected at the end of the academic semester, and some of the participant data is not high quality. To combat this issue, we removed 97 participants from the data set due to manipulation check failures. The result of both situations is that student perception of errors may be different than the overall population.

Within the survey itself, no time separation took place. The cross-sectional nature of the experiment limits the ability to which we can determine full causality. Additionally, we did not employ stimulus sampling for task and relational errors within the survey, which would have greatly expanded the generalizability of survey results.

Implications

It is undeniable that leaders make mistakes, and yet there is limited research on the impacts of these errors, whether they be task-based or relational-based. It is in the best interest of the psychological and workplace communities that we understand leader errors at a deeper level. An error-ridden leader is a truly timeless issue, and the impacts that they leave are pervasive and

long-lasting. In future studies, should the use of stimulus sampling take place, we may gain a more nuanced understanding of how severe participants view task or relational errors to be. From this, studies developed in the future can more accurately depict stimuli which are equally as impactful and realistic. Undoubtedly, humans will continue to make mistakes, but it is how we move forward that will impact the effect.

Appendix A

Figures

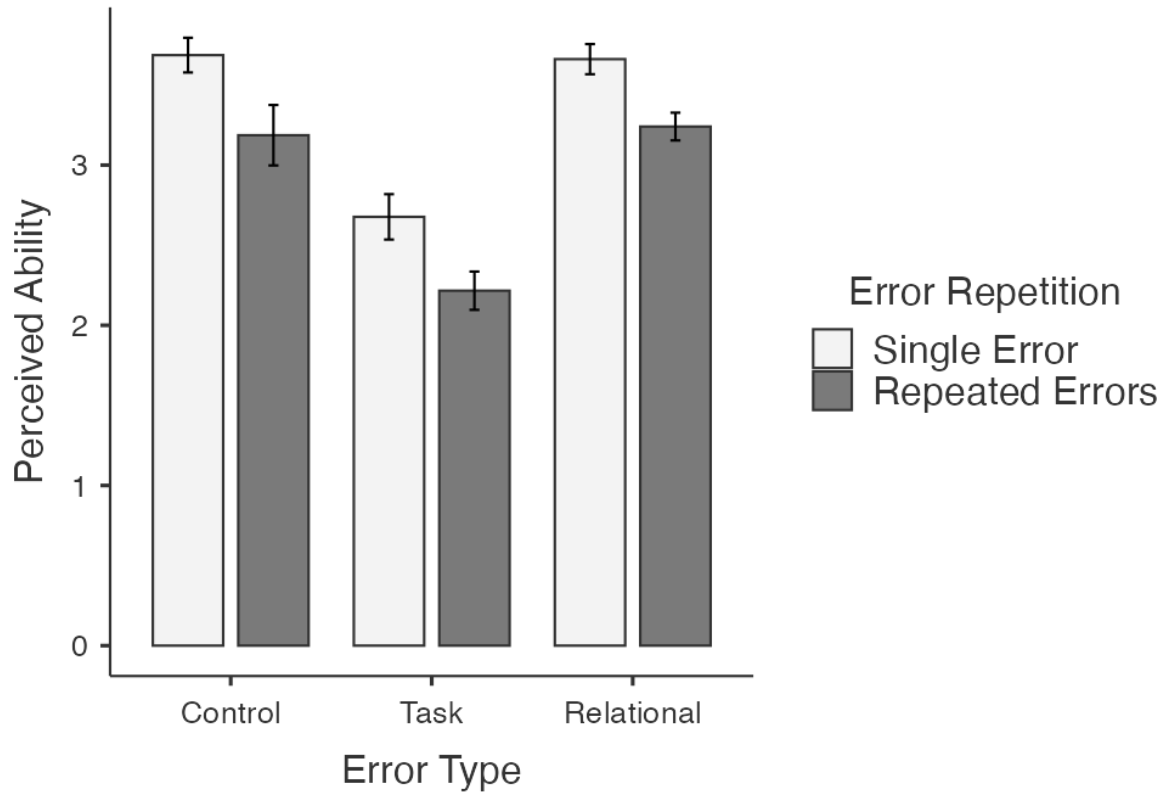


Figure 1: Error Type vs. Perceived Ability

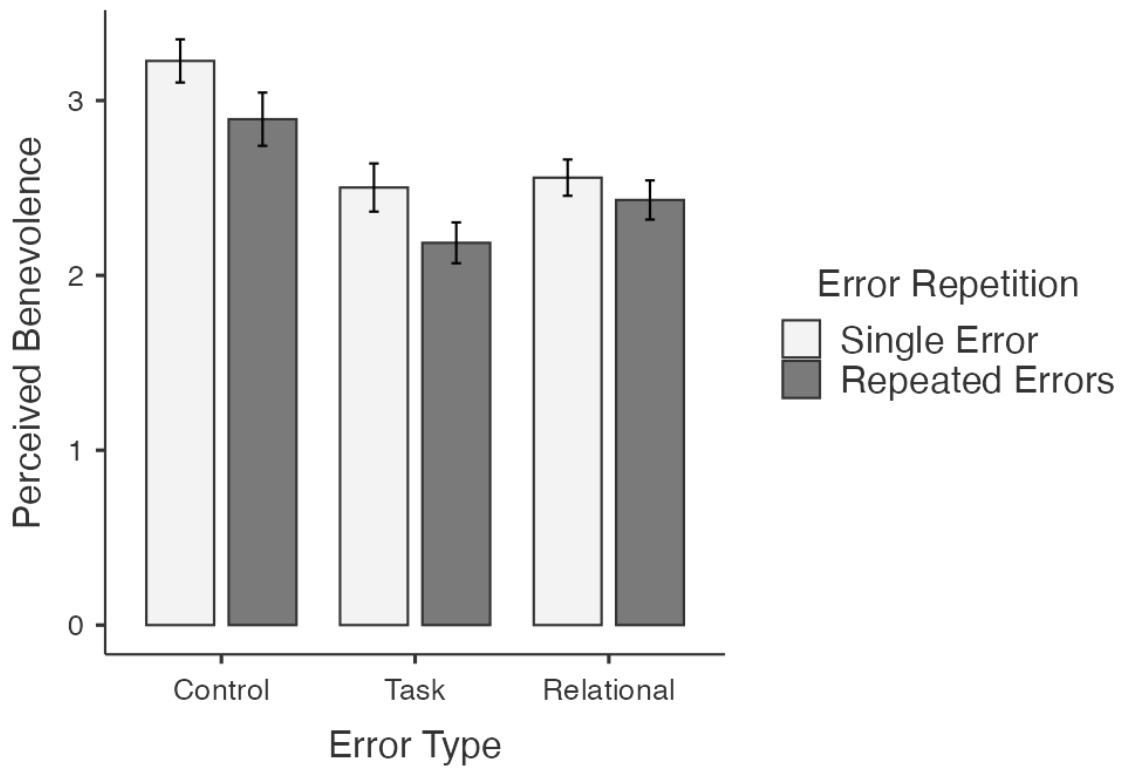


Figure 2: Error Type vs. Perceived Benevolence

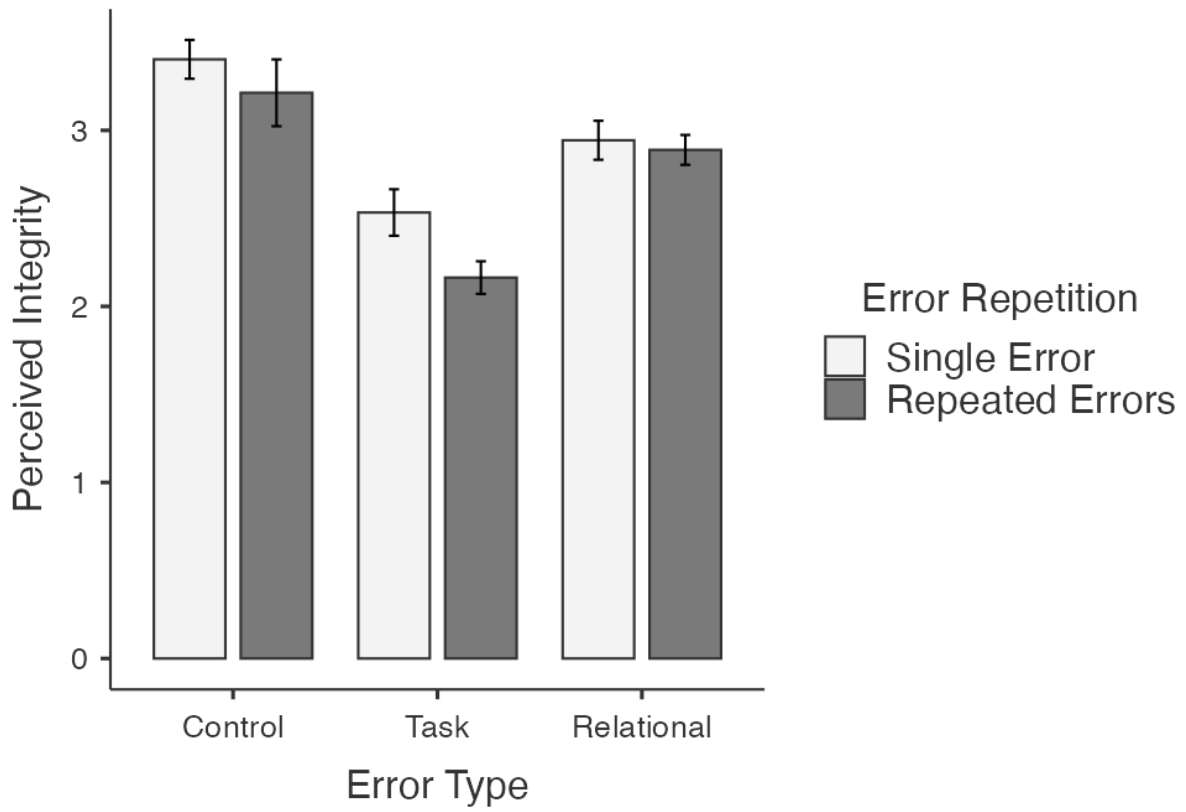


Figure 3: Error Type vs. Perceived Integrity

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University Park, PA

January 2021 – May 2022

- Collaborate with PhD research assistants in developing new assessment center measures to evaluate leadership competencies
- Execute administrative tasks throughout assessment center sessions to ensure that participants properly complete leadership simulations

Arkema

Human Resources Intern

King of Prussia, PA

June 2019 – July 2019

- Facilitated an internal I-9 audit within the corporate center to aid in eliminating about \$50,000 in government fines
- Researched competitive paternal leave policies in order for Arkema to develop their own

ADDITIONAL EXPERIENCES & ACTIVITIES

The Ultimate Bake Shoppe Of Wayne

Sales Associate and Digital Manager

Wayne, PA

October 2017 – July 2022

- Lead customer relations initiatives and manage transactions to ensure operations run smoothly
- Manage company presence and communication on social media and the internet to build a cohesive brand

Penn State Leadership and Innovation Lab

Undergraduate Research Assistant

University Park, PA

August 2019-May 2022

- Assist in quantitatively rating participant responses to enable the lab to progress in lab findings
- Analyze the connection between idea support/rejection and the relationship to creativity and the innovative process

Alpha Delta Pi, Delta Kappa Chapter

Sisterhood Program Specialist (2020), Vice President of Operations (2021)

January 2019-May 2022

THON Rules and Regulation Committee Member, *Volunteer*

October 2019-February 2022

Penn State Psi Chi Honors Society, *Member*

Inducted Spring 2020

Schreyer Africa Maymester Trip, *Days for Girls Volunteer, Hekima Place Volunteer*

May 2019