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Transformational leadership and leader moral orientation: Contrasting an ethic of justice and an ethic of care

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on the moral foundations of transformational leadership has focused on a Kohlbergian (1969, 1976) ethic of justice. However, proposed associations between level of justice reasoning and transformational leadership have received only partial support. We reasoned that an ethic of care would be more consistent with the nature of transformational leadership than would be an ethic of justice. Multilevel regression analyses on data obtained from a sample of leaders ($N = 55$) and followers ($N = 391$) at a Canadian university supported our predictions. Specifically, leader propensity toward using an ethic of care was significantly, positively related to follower perceptions of transformational (but not transactional) leadership. Leader propensity toward an ethic of justice was significantly, positively related to follower perceptions of transactional (but not transformational) leadership. Conceptual, research, and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

During the last decade, there has been a growing interest in the intersection of leadership and ethics (e.g., Banerji & Krishnan, 2000; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Ciulla, 1998a,b; Keeley, 1998; Krishnan, 2001; Wren, 1998). However, despite the supposed centrality of ethics in effective leadership, there remains with few exceptions (e.g., Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003) little empirical research in this area. Continued research could have important implications for leadership selection, development, and training.

The primary purpose of this study was to contrast two alternative accounts of the relationship between leadership behaviors and moral problem solving orientation. While previous research has focused almost exclusively on a Kohlbergian (1969, 1976) ethic of justice when assessing the moral foundations of transformational leadership (e.g., Sivanathan & Fekken, 2002; Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, & Milner, 2002), we contrast two moral reasoning orientations, namely an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982) and an ethic of justice. We argue that an ethic of care would be more consistent with the nature of transformational leadership than would an ethic of justice (Kohlberg, 1969, 1976), and that this distinction could explain inconsistencies in previous findings showing partial (Turner et al., 2002) or no (Sivanathan & Fekken, 2002) support for hypothesized relationships between transformational leadership and an ethic of justice.

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1.1. Transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and moral reasoning

Burns (1978) initially differentiated between “transactional” and “transformational” leadership. Transactional leadership refers to exchanges that advance the purposes of each party in economic, political, or psychological ways. In contrast, transformational leadership goes beyond benefits that accrue to each individual through social exchange, and reflects a relationship in which leaders and followers engage with each other through a shared purpose in ways that transform and elevate their motivation, conduct, and ethical aspirations. Transformational leadership comprises four behavioral dimensions (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006). These include “idealized influence,” in which leaders demonstrate vision and mission, and serve as role models to followers; “inspirational motivation,” characterized by the inspiration of a shared vision and team spirit directed toward achievement of group goals; “intellectual stimulation,” which reflects the processes through which leaders rouse followers toward creativity, innovation, and careful problem solving; and, “individualized consideration,” which is manifested when leaders establish a supportive environment in which they attend carefully to the individual and unique needs of followers. The four dimensions of transformational leadership can be differentiated from transactional leadership style, which itself comprises two components, namely “contingent reward” (an exchange in which rewards are contingent upon actions) and “management by exception” (which involves the use of constructive criticism and negative reinforcement).

Two previous studies have examined the relationship between transformational leadership and moral reasoning. Turner et al. (2002) assessed whether transformational and transactional leadership were associated with different levels of Kohlbergian (1969, 1976) cognitive moral reasoning. Within this framework, individuals are thought to develop through three levels of moral reasoning. In the pre-conventional stage, self-interest is dominant, and obedience to authority takes place to avoid punishment. The conventional level emphasizes a shared understanding of societal norms and values in decision-making. Post-conventional moral reasoning is the third and highest level, in which moral decisions occur based on universal moral principles (e.g., life is more important than property).

Turner et al. (2002) argued that individuals with more complex forms of Kohlbergian moral reasoning will be able to draw on more cognitively sophisticated conceptualizations of interpersonal situations. Therefore, they will be more likely to draw on a larger repertoire of ways to respond to life dilemmas, and to identify benefits inhering in those choices that meet collective as opposed to individual needs. Turner et al. predicted that leaders with higher levels of Kohlbergian reasoning would exhibit more transformational leadership than leaders with lower levels of Kohlbergian reasoning. In addition, because transactional leadership relies on leader-follower exchange, it does not require an ability to identify a wider range of choices that would facilitate group (as opposed to individual) self-interest. Thus, level of moral reasoning was predicted to have no relationship to transactional behaviors. The data showed that leaders with pre-conventional (lowest) levels of moral reasoning demonstrated less transformational leadership behaviors than those with post-conventional (highest) levels of moral reasoning. However, no difference in transformational leadership was found between leaders at the conventional (moderate) level of moral reasoning relative to leaders at either the pre-conventional or post-conventional levels. Their second hypothesis, that no differences in moral reasoning would be found among transactional leaders, was supported.

Sivanathan and Fekken (2002) also considered the relationship between transformational leadership and level of Kohlbergian moral reasoning, but they found that transformational leadership was not related to Kohlbergian moral reasoning level. Thus, whereas Turner et al. (2002) found partial support for their hypotheses about the relationship between transformational leadership and Kohlbergian level of moral reasoning, Sivanathan and Fekken (2002) found no relationship between these two variables.

Although authors of both of these studies identified potential measurement issues that could account for these discrepancies between predicted and observed outcomes,¹ we suggest that specification of the nature of moral problem solving orientation might help account for the relationship between transformational leadership and moral reasoning. Specifically, the ethic of justice (Kohlberg, 1969, 1976), which was used in the two aforementioned studies, and an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982) reflect two different approaches to understanding moral reasoning. In the current study, we develop and test different hypotheses concerning the relationships between transformational and transactional leadership and these two moral orientations of justice and care.

1.2. Comparing moral orientations

Kohlberg's (1969, 1976) model of moral reasoning reflects a justice orientation, and is characterized by a focus on adjudicating between individual interests or rights in solving moral dilemmas. This orientation is predicated on impartiality, fairness, reciprocity, and the application of universal moral principles to abstract features of ethical situations. In the pre-conventional level of moral reasoning, individuals are primarily egocentric in choosing the behaviors that will aid them in avoiding punishment and maximizing self-interest (Kohlberg, 1969, 1976). However, as individuals develop cognitively, equality and fairness assume greater importance in moral decision making. In the conventional stage, fairness is evident in a shared understanding of societal norms and respect for conventions and laws, whereas in the final, post-conventional stage, fairness is related to equality of persons and reciprocity toward one another. Thus, the post-conventional stage is characterized by reliance on universal moral principles that transcend laws.

¹ Turner et al. (2002) identified that normative cut-off points dividing scores on their measure of moral reasoning might have been inadequate to differentiate levels of reasoning. Sivanathan and Fekken (2002) hypothesized that weak internal consistency of their measure of Kohlbergian reasoning combined with a restriction in range associated with use of a homogenous sample may have resulted in an attenuated correlation.

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