The negative impact of chameleon-inducing personalities on employees' ethical work intentions: The mediating role of Machiavellianism

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ABSTRACT

Self-interested moves, such as manipulation and deception in interpersonal relationships with parties inside and outside the workplace, constitute a serious concern for management. Machiavellianism is often directly blamed for such ethical failures, but more generic individual differences, such as those linked to the use of chameleon-like approaches to match an immediate cultural or social environment (i.e., external locus of control, relativistic beliefs), may have indirect influences. Because these chameleon-inducing personalities may foster self-interested decisions, by prompting the abandonment of strict moral codes, this study investigates Machiavellianism as a potential mechanism by which these personalities relate negatively to ethical work intentions. The results, obtained with a sample of 436 banking employees from Spain, reveal that external locus of control and relativistic beliefs relate positively to Machiavellianism, and that Machiavellianism mediates the negative influence of chameleon-inducing personalities on ethical work intentions. The study thus provides novel information for managers interested in reducing employees' Machiavellian tendencies and offers appropriate strategies for deterring their unethical work behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly, world business leaders cite ethics as a cornerstone of social and economic success. For example, Paul Polman, Unilever's chief executive officer, recently emphasized the need to incorporate environmental and social motives into ways of doing business, to transform capitalism into a force for good (Scott, 2013). Yet surveys of business professionals highlight their lack of interest in ethics when it comes to daily business activities and labor relations (Ross, 2013), and employees acknowledge that they continue to observe high rates of unethical behavior at work (Institute of Business Ethics, 2012). That is, even when strong ethics policies are implemented in the organization, employees still seem to make unethical decisions, directed either inside or outside the workplace (Pater & Van Gils, 2003). Thus, organizations still need to better understand how and why employees engage in unethical

behaviors, with the recognition that this type of behavior harms employees' well-being, interpersonal relationships (Dahling, Kugumcu, & Librizzi, 2012), customer satisfaction (Roman, 2003), and corporate reputation (Cravens, Goad-Oliver, & Ramamoorti, 2003).

Most ethical decision-making reseearch focuses on personal variables as antecedents (Craft, 2013), due to their strong ability to determine people's ethical standards, inform their perceptions of ethical problems, and establish their ethical orientations (Rayburn & Rayburn, 1996). In psychological terms, these factors provide "*regularities and consistencies in the behavior of individuals ... across contexts, over time and between domains*" (Snyder, 1983, p. 497). As such, it is not surprising that empirical research largely focuses on analyzing the influence of such personal features on Rest's (1986) four, sequentially ordered, ethical decision-making process steps: awareness, judgment, intent, and behavior (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). Despite calls for investigations of the common foundations of these personality variables though (e.g., self-interest; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010), few studies examine whether any interrelationships arise, prior to their influence on ethical decision making. Kish-Gephart

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et al. (2010) document moderate correlations of some personal features (i.e., external locus of control, relativistic beliefs) with Machiavellianism (hereafter, Mach). But we still do not understand the correlations of either external locus of control (LOC) or relativistic beliefs with Mach. In this interesting but unexplored research area, the findings could help managers direct workplace relationships and ethical behaviors more effectively.

In particular, Mach has received widespread attention as a determinant of ethical decision making (Liu, 2008), with a strong negative influence observed often in organizational behavior research (Craft, 2013; Dahling et al., 2012; Grover & Enz, 2005; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). It features detrimental characteristics, such as manipulation, untruthful behavior, deceitful tactics, and cool detachment (e.g., Liu, 2008), but little is known about its links to other personal features, even though identifying them could help managers realize both its presence and its potential effects in the workplace. Because Mach is a personal variable that prompts specific, direct, self-interested actions (Grover & Enz, 2005; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010), we posit that other demographic (i.e., level of education; Christie & Geis, 1970) or generic personal features might influence its presence. For example, Liu (2008) suggests that a more malleable and unstable person, in terms of values to follow and aspire to in working life, is more likely to exhibit Mach tendencies. This, therefore, leaves open the possibility that other related personal variables influence this psychological variable.

Two critical and related personal variables that might link to Mach are external LOC and relativistic beliefs, which also can lead to unethical decision making (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Because both these personality elements can push people to adopt a chameleon-like approach—in which they adopt, at any given time, values perceived as dominant in the immediate cultural and social environment (e.g., Casali, 2008; Hample & Dallinger, 1987; Johnson, 1990)—their presence should lead people to make decisions oriented to attaining their own self-interests. People who use a chameleon-like approach may lack strict moral values (Casali, 2008) and behave more in line with contextual moral cues, allowing for the emergence of a self-interested mentality (Oh, Charlier, Mount, & Berry, 2014). In a social situation, such actors likely ask, "*Who does this situation want me to be, and how can I become that person?*" instead of "*Who am I and how can I be me in this situation?*" (Kilduff & Day, 1994, p. 1048, extracted from Snyder, 1979), and they seek the most convenient answer to achieve their goals. As such, because the use of such approaches might lead people to make self-interested decisions and, through Mach, influence ethical work intentions negatively, we believe we can effectively explain recent findings that Mach is highly, positively correlated with these chameleon-inducing personalities (i.e., external LOC, relativistic beliefs; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010).

Although both external LOC and relativistic beliefs appear negatively linked to ethical decision making (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010), existing evidence is somewhat mixed (e.g. Forte, 2004; Marta, Singhapakdi, & Kraft, 2008), suggesting the possible existence of underlying mechanisms (e.g., self-interest) through which both personalities negatively influence ethical decision making (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Because external LOC and relativistic beliefs might induce holders to adopt a chameleon-like approach (e.g., Casali, 2008; Hample & Dallinger, 1987; Johnson, 1990) they may be more likely to engage in self-interested behaviors and disregard the consequences of their actions on others. Such behaviors appear closely connected with descriptions of Mach people, who are characterized by their use of chameleon-like approaches (Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Snyder, 1974) and situational manipulations to secure personal gains at the expense of others' well-being (Dahling et al., 2012; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). The notion that Mach, an overwhelming personal feature (Grover &

Enz, 2005), might be the mechanism by which chameleon-inducing personalities relate negatively to employees' ethical decision making thus appears feasible (e.g. Bass, Barnett, & Brown, 1999). With this study we seek to explore this possibility more closely by investigating employees' ethical work intention, which constitutes the penultimate step in the overall decision-making process (i.e., awareness, judgment, intention, behavior; Rest, 1986) and also offers a widely accepted proxy for ethical work behavior (e.g., Azjen & Fishbein, 1980; Elango, Paul, Kundu, & Paudel, 2010; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010).

In business ethics literature, ethical intention occurs after the recognition that the situation involves moral implications (awareness) and after formulating a decision about what is ethically right (judgment), to provide a teleological grounding of future action and a sense of purpose or meaning about what is to be done (Bright, Alzola, Stansbury, & Stavros, 2011). Because ethical intention immediately precedes taking some action consistent with that intent (behavior) (Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Treviño, 1986), we define ethical work intentions as anticipated behaviors at work that can lead to human growth and flourishing (Guillen, Ferrero, & Hoffman, 2015), in accordance with universal moral principles that judge a future action as good, right, fair, honest, just (Goldman, 1993), praiseworthy, virtuous (Beauchamp, 1982), and that aim to be morally acceptable by the larger community (Jones, 1991). Thus, in this article, we explore the negative direct influence of external LOC and relativistic beliefs on employees' ethical work intentions, or what employees intend to do (anticipated behavior) when confronted with ethical dilemmas in social interactions at work. Then we examine the mediating role of Mach in these relationships, shedding light on the path by which external LOC and relativistic beliefs can harm ethical work intentions.

Examining these mediated relationships is also important because Mach underlies multiple unethical actions (e.g., verbal and nonverbal aggression, deception, manipulative communications, exploitative tactics; Beu, Buckley, & Harvey, 2003), all of which can damage workplace well-being (Dahling et al., 2012). Because Mach is a personal orientation defined in specific, manipulative, interpersonal terms (Allsopp, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1991; Christie & Geis, 1970), it remains difficult to assess; measures often suffer from social desirability biases (Corral & Calvete, 2000). However, with a clearer understanding of its correlates with other personal features, managers might be able to detect the Mach tendencies of job candidates and current employees, and then plan appropriate strategies for dealing with (un)ethical behavior and well-being issues in the workplace.

Finally, because prior studies have focused on the direct effects of psychological variables on ethical decision making (Beu et al., 2003; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010), this study contributes by explaining the interrelationships of those variables and their effects on ethical work intentions. In response to Kish-Gephart et al.'s (2010) call to identify the key drivers of unethical behavior at work, we theoretically address the psycho-cognitive mechanisms that might underlie the negative effects of external LOC, relativistic beliefs, and Mach on ethical work intentions. Consistent with their suggestions, we argue that people's self-interested unconscious motives (Hobbes, 1651/1991; Smith, 1776/1998) play a role and are more susceptible to occur with a chameleon-like approach.

1.1. Theoretical framework

The idea that humans are driven by both self-interest and other-orientation motives has long permeated organizational psychology and organizational behavior research (De Dreu & Nauta, 2009). However, despite existing research into human motivations based on moral and social grounds (Guillen et al., 2015), automatic and