Ethical leadership and follower voice and performance: The role of follower identifications and entity morality beliefs

Weichun Zhu [a,*], Hongwei He [b,3], Linda K. Treviño [c,1], Melody M. Chao [d,2], Weiyue Wang [e,4]

[a] School of Labor and Employment Relations, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA
[b] Marketing Department, Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland G4 0QU, UK
[c] Smeal College of Business, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA
[d] Department of Management, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China
[e] Coventry Business School, Coventry University, Coventry, U.K.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Previous studies have established the relationship between ethical leadership and a variety of positive follower outcomes. Follower organizational identification has been found to mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and follower job performance. In this research, we incorporate a second distinct and theoretically important type of social identification process, relational identification with the leader, along with organizational identification, and examine their mediating effects on follower performance and voice outcomes. Further, we bring the implicit theory of morality to the behavioral ethics literature and examine follower morality beliefs as a moderator. Using a Romanian sample of 302 followers under the supervision of 27 leaders, we found that ethical leadership has an indirect effect on follower job performance and voice (through the mediating mechanisms of both organizational and relational identifications) and that these relationships are stronger for followers who held the implicit theory that a person's moral character is fixed.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

An increasing amount of research has supported the significant impact of ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), on follower outcomes, including follower job performance (Piccolo, Greenbaum, Hartog, & Folger, 2010; Walumbwa, Morrison, & Christensen, 2012; Walumbwa et al., 2011), voice (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011; Brown et al., 2005; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), and other positive (Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, & Zivnuska, 2011; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Schaubroeck et al., 2012), and negative behaviors (Mayer et al., 2012; Stouten et al., 2010). Recently, more attention has been paid to understanding the mediating mechanisms that underlie these relationships. The ethical leadership construct was initially proposed to rely on social learning processes to produce its effects (Brown et al., 2005). More recently, researchers have emphasized the prominent role of social identification processes by focusing on organizational

* Corresponding author. Tel.: + 1 814 865 9116.
E-mail addresses: wzhu@psu.edu (W. Zhu), hongwei.he@strath.ac.uk (H. He), ltrevino@psu.edu (L.K. Treviño), mchao@ust.hk (M.M. Chao), W.Wang1@salford.ac.uk (W. Wang).
[1] Tel.: +1 814 865 2194.
[2] Tel.: +852 23587739.
[3] Tel.: +44 161 295 5623.
[4] Tel.: + 44 2477 659 461.

identification as a mediator (Walumbwa et al., 2011). We propose a model that includes two types of social identification mechanisms as mediators and that proposes a moderator of these effects that is new to the behavioral ethics literature, implicit morality beliefs.

Identification processes have previously been proposed as a potential mediating mechanism (e.g., Brown & Mitchell, 2010) in the ethical leadership/outcome relationship (Walumbwa et al., 2011). We expand the prior exclusive focus on organizational identification to account for the likely important role played by an employee's relational identification with the leader. Relational identification represents the extent to which one defines oneself in terms of a given role–relationship (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), in this case, the relationship with the ethical leader. Relational identification seems to be particularly important because, especially for supervisory leaders, regular interaction with the leader is likely, and the relationship to the leader is psychologically closer than is the relationship to the organization. Therefore relational identification should play a particularly important mediating role in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee outcomes (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Carmeli, Atwater, & Levi, 2011; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008; Zhang, Chen, Chen, Liu, & Johnson, 2012).

Perhaps more importantly, we propose that these identification processes will operate differently for employees holding different implicit morality beliefs. Individuals hold and utilize different implicit theories to make sense of the social world (Gopnik & Wellman, 1994; Kelly, 1955). These beliefs represent unspoken assumptions that can influence how people understand and structure their experiences. Although the implicit theory of managers has been shown to influence procedural justice and performance appraisal of employees (e.g., Heslin, Latham, & VandeWalle, 2005; Heslin & VandeWalle, 2011), and the implicit theory of morality in particular has been shown to influence individuals' understanding of and responses toward moral situations (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995), research has not yet considered how this important morality belief influences the reactions of employees toward ethical leadership. The implicit theory of morality seems particularly relevant to the study of ethical leadership because implicitly held assumptions about ethical people, and systems should influence how employees react to ethical leaders. Thus, we propose that the implicit theory of morality will help to explain why individuals with different implicit morality beliefs will react differently to ethical leaders.

We chose to study two outcomes, follower job performance and voice behavior, because, first, job performance is such a critical outcome (Piccolo et al., 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2011, 2012). Second, follower voice is an important type of contextual performance (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001) that ethical leaders can also influence (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Voice behavior refers to a follower voluntarily expressing constructive ideas, comments, suggestions, and questions, and has profound implications for learning in organizations (Burris, 2012; Detert & Burris, 2007; Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012; Morrison, 2011; Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Mishra, 2011). Additionally, as a type of cooperative and extra-role behavior, it has ethical implications (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino, & Edmondson, 2009; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998, 2001). Moreover, voice seems to be particularly relevant given our study of identification processes. An employee who identifies with an ethical leader and with the organization is likely to feel safer about speaking up. Finally, examining these two outcomes simultaneously has the advantage of testing the impact of ethical leadership on two follower outcomes with less (job performance) and more (voice behavior) ethical implications, providing a more complete picture regarding ethical leadership effects. These outcomes are also particularly relevant to the mediating mechanisms. A follower who identifies with the leader and the organization is likely to wish to perform at a higher level and will feel safer speaking up.

We found support for our theoretical model (see Fig. 1) in a field survey in Romania with data collected at two points in time and from multiple sources. We measured ethical leadership and entity morality beliefs in the first wave and follower identification with the leader and organization in the second wave. Job performance and voice behavior were rated by supervisors during the second wave.

This research makes several important contributions. First, we answer 'how' questions related to the social identification mediating mechanisms that connect ethical leadership to outcomes. Our research finds that relational identification and organizational identification independently and equally contribute to the effectiveness of ethical leadership. Second, we contribute to the ethical
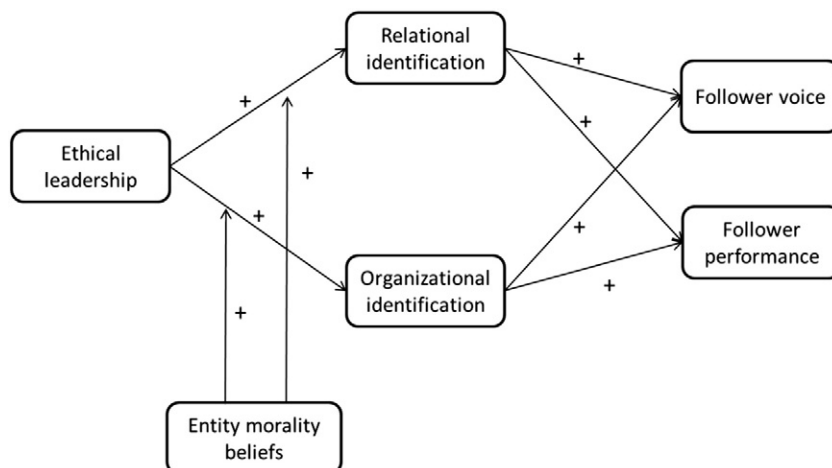

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.