



The impact of life stage and societal culture on subordinate influence ethics: A study of Brazil, China, Germany, and the U.S.

David A. Ralston ^{a,*}, Carolyn P. Egri ^b, Tania Casado ^c, Pingping Fu ^d, Florian Wangenheim ^e

^a University of Oklahoma, Price College of Business, 307 West Brooks, Norman, OK 73019, United States

^b Simon Fraser University, Canada

^c University of Sao Paulo, Brazil

^d Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong (SAR)

^e Universitaet Dortmund, Germany

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate the effects of societal values and life stage on subordinate influence ethics. Based on the evolving crossvergence theory of macro-level predictors of values evolution, we demonstrate the applicability of crossvergence theory in the micro-level context. Furthermore, our study provides the first empirical multi-level analysis of influence ethics utilizing a multiple-country sample. Thus, we illustrate how the breath of crossvergence can be expanded to provide a multi-level theoretical foundation of values and behavior evolution across cultures. Specifically, we integrate micro-level life stage theory and macro-level societal culture theory to concurrently assess the contributions of each theory in explaining subordinate influence ethics across the diverse societies of Brazil, China, Germany and the U.S. Consistent with previous research, we found significant societal differences in influence ethics. However, we also found that life stage theory played a significant role in understanding influence ethics. Thus, our findings expand the crossvergence perspective on societal change, indicating that key micro-level predictors (e.g., life stage) should be included in cross-cultural research.

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1. Introduction

"Ethics is the discipline that examines one's moral standards or the moral standards of a society (Velasquez, 2002). If something is ethical, this means it is of an acceptable standard in terms of one's personal and social welfare" (Alas, 2006: 238). An appreciation of ethical issues in business is important because ethical congruence is crucial to a successful relationship whether at societal or individual level. At the societal level, the relevance of cross-national differences in ethical behavior can be seen in corruption perception indices that clearly show that corrupt societies are not successful in developing relationships (e.g., attracting foreign direct investment) from the more ethically and economically advanced global business community (Davis and Ruhe, 2003). Similarly, individual-level research has shown that ethical congruence is crucial for successful work relationships (Fu et al., 2004). In this paper, our focus is on ethics in the workplace and specifically on perspectives on the ethics of different means used by subordinates to influence superiors in an organization.

Previous studies have investigated upward influence ethics across a variety of countries (e.g., Egri et al., 2000). Other studies have investigated ethics among different demographic groups within a single country (e.g., Higgins et al., 2003). However, to the best of our knowledge, only one study (Ralston et al., 2005) has started to integrate these two research tracks by investigating ethics across two countries and between two age groups in each country.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 405 321 9994.

E-mail address: dralston@ou.edu (D.A. Ralston).

The present study has both an empirical and a conceptual objective for advancing the current state of the international business literature. Our empirical objective is to extend previous research to the next level of complexity with a multi-level and multi-country design. As such, this study provides a stronger empirical test of the generalizability of previous study findings that were substantially more limited in terms of scope and depth. Conceptually, the integrated micro and macro design of the present study has its foundation in crossvergence theory, even though crossvergence theory was initially developed as a macro-level predictor of individual values (Ralston, 2008). Thus, our conceptual goal is to use our study on subordinate ethics to exemplify how crossvergence theory can be expanded to be a multi-level (macro and micro) predictor of values/behavior, in general. As such, we take crossvergence theory to its next level of development by providing a more encompassing, multi-level interpretation of the theory. This multi-level extension provides a theoretical foundation for future multi-level investigations of cross-cultural phenomena as called for repeatedly during the past quarter of the century (Meglino and Ravlin, 1998; Negandhi, 1983; Tung, 2008).

Specifically, we investigate influence ethics compatibility across different life stage (micro-level) and socio-cultural (macro-level) groups. Our overarching empirical goal is to assess the relative contributions of life stage and societal culture for predicting differences in subordinate influence ethics. To this end, we explore answers to the following two questions. [1] Is micro-level “life stage” a significant predictor of subordinate influence ethics in the cross-cultural context? [2] Is macro-level “society” a significant predictor of subordinate influence ethics, and if so, is society sufficiently robust to be the *only* explanatory macro-level predictor needed?

To answer these questions, we investigated subordinate influence ethics in four diverse cultures (Brazil, China, Germany, and the U.S.) across the two life stage groups (early adulthood and middle adulthood) that are most relevant in a workforce assessment. We present three sets of sequential analyses. First, we analyzed our data as though we were solely testing for a life stage effect with a multi-society dataset. Second, in traditional cross-cultural research fashion, we analyzed our data to test for a society difference effect. Third, we took our four societies and two life stage periods per society to form eight society-by-life stage groups to simultaneously test the relationships and differences among these groups. The first two analyses provide us with baseline replications of previous studies that looked solely at either life stage or societal differences. The third analysis takes these previous approaches a step further by integrating life stage and society effects into the same analysis to provide a more complete explanation of the subordinate influence ethics phenomenon.

In the following sections of this paper, we briefly describe the subordinate influence ethics measures that are used as the dependent variables in the study, and we identify the societies selected and the reason for selecting these societies. Identifying the measures and the societies, lays the groundwork for our discussion of the literature germane to subordinate influence ethics in these societies, which in turn leads to our development of three sets of hypotheses predicting subordinate influence ethics behavior from the perspectives of life stage theory, macro crossvergence theory, and the multi-level, integrated life stage and crossvergence theories. We conclude the paper with a discussion of study results, as well as implications for future research and managerial practice.

1.1. The selection of measures for the study

In our study, we use as our dependent measures the three dimensions of the subordinate influence ethics hierarchy. This three-step hierarchy of subordinate ethicality has been confirmed across a wide variety of countries in prior research (Egri et al., 2000; Ralston et al., 2005, 2006b, 2001, 2009; Ralston and Pearson, 2003; Terpstra et al., 2002), and it has the added advantage of being cross-culturally conceived and developed (Ralston and Pearson, 2003). The dimensions of the hierarchy, from most ethical to least ethical are: organizationally beneficial behaviors, self-indulgent behaviors and destructive behaviors.

1.1.1. Organizationally beneficial behavior

These are the standard prescribed and sanctioned behaviors for employees in organizations. They may be viewed as the “organizational person” approach to subordinate influence because these behaviors tend to be directly beneficial to the organization. Organizationally beneficial behaviors include: demonstrating the ability to get the job done, behaving in a manner that is seen as appropriate in the company, and maintaining good working relationships with other employees.

1.1.2. Self-indulgent behavior

These behaviors are self-serving for the individual within the organization. They epitomize the “it’s me first” approach in that these behaviors show self-interest being above the interests of others or the organization. Whether they help or harm the organization is subject to interpretation and may be determined by the situation. Self-indulgent behaviors include: spreading rumors about someone or something that stands in the way of their advancement, trying to influence the boss to make a bad decision, if that decision would help them to get ahead, and blaming another for their own mistakes.

1.1.3. Destructive behavior

These are extremely self-serving behaviors that directly hurt others, and often times, the organization. In many industrialized societies, these behaviors would also be considered illegal. They may be described as a “burn, pillage, and plunder” approach to gain influence because of the harm these behaviors can bring to others and the organization. Destructive behaviors include: threatening to give valuable company information to someone outside the organization if their demands are not met, offering sexual favors to a superior, and stealing secret corporate documents and give them to another company in return for a better job at the other company.

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