



Followers' moral judgments and leaders' integrity-based transgressions: A synthesis of literatures

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the state of knowledge about integrity-based transgressions with an emphasis on the leader-follower relationship. Our review highlighted many important contributions of this literature, but, it revealed several limitations that should be addressed within a followership paradigm. We then synthesized the integrity and trust literatures with a targeted review of moral experimental philosophy. Cushman's (2008) dual process model suggests that because followers simultaneously assess leaders' intentions and their causal nexus with negative outcomes, they might judge behavioral and moral integrity transgressions in different ways. Judgments of moral condemnation should primarily be a function of perceived intent while blame and punishment of the leader based on behavior should be jointly affected by cause and intent. This moral assessment is expected to influence followers' trust through its effect on moral identity. A framework is offered for guiding future studies of followers' interpretations of leaders' integrity-based transgressions.

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"The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office"

[–Dwight D. Eisenhower]

Introduction

Years of research support former President Eisenhower's assertion. Integrity does, indeed, appear to be one of the fundamental ingredients of effective leadership, and, it has become an integral component of many currently popular leadership perspectives including Authentic Leadership, Transformational Leadership, and Ethical Leadership (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Den Hartog, 2015). Leaders' integrity is, however, sufficiently perplexing that *The Leadership Quarterly* devoted a special issue to it (Volume 24, Issue 3, Pages 391–462 (June 2013)).

An overwhelming amount of the research discussed by the various contributions to that special issue confirmed that leaders' integrity is positively related to a wide range of performance and attitudinal outcomes across individual, group, and organizational levels (e.g., Davis and Rothstein, 2006; Halbesleben et al., 2013; Leroy, Palanski, and Simons, 2012). But, leaders are also only

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human; we know that even well-intentioned leaders can have lapses in moral or ethical judgment (Basford, 2014; Eubanks and Mumford, 2010). Unfortunately, surprisingly little is known about the judgmental processes that followers use to assess leaders' violations of their presumed integrity. Given integrity's importance for effective follower-leader relationships, what is to become of a once respected leader who has intentionally or possibly unintentionally violated followers' trust by engaging in integrity-based wrongdoing? How will their followers judge the leader whose character has been tarnished? Can we predict when the followers' trust will be damaged beyond meaningful repair?

Given the importance of questions such as these and the high potential for damage to organizational functioning that might stem from leaders' trust violations, integrity and morality have been surprisingly under-researched topics within the leadership domain (Moorman, Darnold, and Priesemuth, 2013), with the possible exception of Behavioral Integrity (Simons, 2002). It is clear that over the past decade behavioral integrity (Simons, 2002) has dominated researchers' efforts to understand leaders' integrity despite the fact that their moral integrity is arguably an equally important focus (Simons, Palanski, and Treviño, 2013). To date, however, the critical distinction that exists between these two forms of integrity has not been explicitly or systematically incorporated into researchers' efforts to understand the consequences of leaders' transgressions for followers' trust.

The purposes of the present paper are, therefore, to (1) review the literature on integrity-based wrongdoing and subsequent damage to trust in order to provide a picture of what is currently known, and, to identify important gaps in our understanding. Once this baseline has been established, the review will (2) systematically synthesize the current state of knowledge about integrity-based wrongdoing with the experimental philosophy literature on moral cognition (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Cushman, 2015; Guglielmo, 2015; Malle and Knobe, 1997). In particular, the moral judgment and decision-making literature suggests that the concept of intent must be simultaneously considered with causal attributions in order to describe observers' reactions to integrity-based wrongdoing. The focus of this synthesis will be (3) on the important contribution that the moral judgment literature's view of intent as a highly complex, multifaceted phenomenon makes to understanding leaders' transgressions. Finally, we will (4) suggest that threats (Petriglieri, 2011) to followers' moral identities (Aquino and Reed, 2002) is the mediating mechanism that links followers' moral judgments and trust following leaders' behavioral and moral integrity-based wrongdoing.

A follower-centric review effort that is focused on judgments of leaders' integrity-based wrongdoing is warranted because followers' need and desire to judge their leaders' integrity is pervasive and nearly automatic (Kong, 2013). Thus, when leaders engage in integrity-based wrongdoing, their behavior will be highly salient and seen as a unique form of leader behavior, if for no other reason than its infrequency. As such, the wrongdoing will constitute a heavily weighted input into followers' impressions of their leaders, a *critical moment*, as it has been labeled by Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid and Elving (2006, p. 197). An ability to model the effect of such a critical moment will, therefore, represent a meaningful contribution to the development of the nascent literature on leaders' transgressions, and to the rapidly developing identity-based followership literature (e.g., Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, and Topakas, 2013; Lord and Brown, 2004; Oc and Bashshur, 2013; Steffens, Haslam, and Reicher, 2014a; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten, 2014).

Integrity and trust

Before we turn to the task of evaluating the literature on integrity-based transgressions, it will be helpful to articulate the leadership field's current thinking about the fundamental concepts of integrity and trust. Fortunately, there are several excellent reviews of a number of perspectives on both of these literatures (e.g., Colquitt, Scott, and LePine, 2007; Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012; Kim, Dirks, and Cooper, 2009; Korsgaard, Brower, and Lester, 2015; Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer, 1998; Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis, 2007; Simons, Leroy, Collewaert, and Masschelein, 2015). There is, therefore, no need to duplicate these existing review efforts. Rather, we will use these comprehensive efforts and highlight a number of relevant aspects of these literatures in order to establish the foundations for framing a discussion of leaders' integrity-based transgressions as violations of trust. These prior efforts should also help to establish the possible role that post-transgression trust plays in contemporary identity-based theories of followership (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, and Lord, *in press*; Epitropaki et al., 2013; Lord and Brown, 2004; Steffens et al., 2014a; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Integrity

In the leadership literature, there is a nearly axiomatic acknowledgement of the importance of integrity for building trust with followers (Grover, Hasel, Manville, and Serrano-Archimi, 2014; Thoroughgood, Sawyer, and Hunter, 2013). Integrity is presumed to be linked to numerous values-related constructs including ethics, morality, honesty, and sincerity. During the past decade, however, there has been an important divergence of definitions of the concept of integrity. Two dominant schools of thought have emerged, the first assuming that integrity does not necessarily encompass a moral values component (behavioral integrity) and the second one assuming that it does (moral integrity).

A number of perspectives on integrity have appeared in the organizational behavior literatures. Based on their comprehensive review, Palanski and Yammarino (2007) identified five primary themes encompassing the meaning of integrity including wholeness, consistency of words and actions, consistency in adversity, being true to oneself, and moral/ethical behavior. Subsequently, they have suggested as have others (e.g., Simons, 2002) that the most fruitful perspective for leadership research is to focus on the consistencies of one's words and actions.

By far, the most often cited form of integrity related to word-action consistencies has been described as **Behavioral Integrity** (Simons, Tomlinson, and Leroy, 2011; Tomlinson, Lewicki, and Ash, 2014). Behavioral integrity defines an individual's

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