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A qualitative study investigating the ethical decision making process: A proposed model[☆]

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ABSTRACT

We describe the results of a qualitative research study involving senior military and civilian leaders of the Department of Defense. We followed a grounded theory approach in proposing an inductive model which integrates the theories of ethics, decision making, and leadership with the experiences and formal training of our respondents. Our model accomplishes two purposes. First, it illustrates the complex nature of the intervening steps between moral awareness and ethical/unethical decision outcomes. Second, it depicts a process for developing ethical decision making expertise. The proposed model is intended to stimulate educators, training and development professionals, and practicing leaders to design and implement programs to develop ethical leader decision making.

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1. Introduction

The topic of ethical leadership has always been an important issue in the management of organizations. At its core, leader behavior is the end result of a decision making process. That is, regardless of whether leader behavior is described as being authentic, spiritual, or transformational, a decision making process was executed prior to the enacted behavior. Thus, a clear understanding of the ethical decision-making process is critical for a better understanding of ethical leadership. In this study we define *ethical decision making* as the process of recognizing a need, considering alternatives, identifying a morally acceptable option (i.e. what is considered right in a given culture) and implementing it.

Using quantitative research methods, researchers have revealed valuable findings about what factors (e.g., individual characteristics, moral issue characteristics, organizational environmental characteristics; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010) are associated with ethical and unethical decision making. Fewer studies have approached ethical decision making as a “black box” and conducted in-depth investigations regarding the specifics of the process executed in enacting leader behavior (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). Thus, those constituencies interested in ethical decision making can benefit from more explorations into the black box of the decision-making process. In this study, we explore the ethical decision making process.

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1.1. Research gaps in leadership studies

In their survey of the leadership research, Hunter, Bedell-Avers, and Mumford (2007) profiled the typical leadership study. First, the typical empirical leadership study has frequently focused more on lower-level managers than senior executives. Thus, we know less about senior executives than lower-level managers. Second, the dominant empirical research method has been quantitative with researchers collecting subordinate perceptions of leader behavior via self-report surveys. Consequently, the behaviors under investigation are largely determined in advance by the researchers. Furthermore, many leader activities may not be witnessed by subordinates. Thus, many leader behaviors are likely left unassessed. Conversely, in a qualitative investigation, respondents can determine the content domain of the data collected. Third, leader studies using a quantitative methodology cannot easily capture processes and series of activities that occur over time. Furthermore, multi-level relationships which are a necessary aspect of leadership provide a more comprehensive conceptualization of the leadership process. With a qualitative methodology, processes can be more effectively tracked. Fourth, leader errors, mistakes, or lapses in the execution of leadership decisions and actions are understudied. This implies that leader errors are irrelevant. A qualitative methodology can incorporate errors committed by leaders more readily. Thus, a more complete perspective on ethical leader behavior can be described. Fifth, unobservable cognitive and behavioral influences on the leadership process are more difficult to assess in quantitative studies. Contrarily, in qualitative studies, these influences can more readily be assessed and described.

We believe that the typical leadership study has left significant gaps in our understanding of how the ethical decision-making process occurs over time for senior leaders. Because of these gaps, some leadership researchers have advocated the use of a qualitative methodology (cf. Conger, 1998; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003). Thus, our understanding of leadership can be enhanced by including the decision-making processes senior executives implement in their roles.

Indeed, the qualitative research on ethical executive leadership has revealed some interesting antecedents. For example, Treviño et al. (2003) conducted interviews with 20 chief executive officers and 20 ethics officers during which each interviewee was asked semi-structured questions so that contrasting profiles could be developed of ethical leaders and ethically neutral leaders. The antecedents of ethical executive behavior were being more people oriented, setting ethical standards, holding employees accountable, and being more broadly ethically aware.

Similarly, in a study of 17 senior leaders, who were pre-identified as being ethical, Frisch and Huppenbauer (2014) conducted interviews to ascertain opinions about stakeholders. Examples of their findings included that these ethical executive leaders valued multiple stakeholders, fostered positive relationships with stakeholders, served as ethical role models, and communicated ethical standards. Furthermore, the consequences of ethical executive leadership enhanced the well-being of the stakeholders. These two studies demonstrate the potential in using qualitative methodology to study ethical executive leaders.

1.2. The present study

Our objective in conducting this qualitative study was twofold. First, we wanted to prompt our respondents to collectively establish the content domain (i.e., factors) that contribute to ethical and unethical decision making. Second, we wanted respondents to describe the process they executed in implementing these decisions. In pursuit of these two objectives we were particularly interested in evaluating whether or not current models of ethical decision-making adequately capture both the content domain and the process involved in making ethical decisions. For example, one widely recognized ethical decision-making model is the four-factor model proposed by Rest (1986). First, the individual must recognize that an ethical issue exists. Second, the individual makes an ethical judgment. Third, the individual forms a behavioral intention, and finally, the individual engages in behavior (i.e., action). Jones (1991) added the notion that not all ethical issues are alike and suggested a set of six characteristics (i.e., moral intensity) that should be considered when understanding ethical decision-making. Ferrell and Gresham (1985) and Treviño (1986) added the components of the social and cultural environment, individual difference variables, and opportunity to Rest's basic, four-factor model. Whether or not these models capture both the content domain and process of ethical decision making has critical implications for both theory (understanding how and why ethical decisions are made) and practice (how this understanding can be applied and taught in schools and organizations).

In the pursuit of these objectives, we believe our research design was well-suited to evaluate potential gaps in our current understanding of the ethical decision-making process as it occurs over time for several reasons. First, our respondents were 25 senior leaders who were colonels and lieutenant colonels in the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and equivalent high ranking employees in the Department of Defense (DoD). Our officers represent the top 4.2% of the USAF. Therefore, we consider our respondents to be senior leaders. Second, we employed a qualitative methodology consisting of a semi-structured interview schedule. Third, using this qualitative methodology, we captured the decision-making process as it occurred over time. Fourth, by following a semi-structured interview schedule, our respondents contrasted the factors they considered relevant in decisions they made that were deemed ethical and unethical. From our analysis of their responses, we propose a detailed process model that depicts the steps, experiences, knowledge, learned attributes, and skills which affected their ethical and unethical decisions. Fifth, we incorporated unobservable cognitive and behavioral factors that influence the ethical and unethical decision-making process. Unlike the research by Treviño et al. (2003) and Frisch and Huppenbauer (2014) which propose antecedents to ethical leadership, our process model consists of antecedents and moderators which are ordered and depict the sequence in which each impacts ethical and unethical decision making. Furthermore, the model we propose incorporates the notion of time (Shipp & Cole, 2015). Sixth, our final product is a model which depicts the process of developing ethical decision-making expertise.

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