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Learning from stories of leadership: How reading about personalized and socialized politicians impacts performance on an ethical decision-making simulation

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ABSTRACT

Stories about notable, 20th-century politicians were investigated as a means by which reading stories of leadership influences subsequent ethical decision-making performance. Undergraduates read four short stories in which charismatic politicians exhibited a personalized, socialized, or neutral power orientation, followed by responding to four ethical dilemmas in the marketing domain—a distant transfer task. Results indicated that reading stories featuring personalized protagonists inhibited subsequent ethical decision-making processes. However, intensity of narrative processing, personal identification with the protagonist, and presence or absence of an ethical salience probe moderated these effects. Implications are discussed regarding the use of stories as a tool for ethical development and the importance of managing stories of leadership circulated throughout organizations and society.

Stories come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Consider the vast number of novels, memoirs, biographies, radio stories, songs, television shows, movies, and theatrical dramas produced every year. Many of these stories, whether fictional or based on historical events, feature as protagonists prominent characters who wield substantial influence over others—that is, individuals who are recognized and remembered for their acts of leadership. These protagonists span every conceivable domain, such as senior managers of global corporations, presidents, prime ministers, social activists, military chiefs, kings and queens, and even those held to be religious prophets.

For example, two major motion pictures and multiple biographies were produced about the life of the former CEO of Apple, Steve Jobs, within the last five years. Presently, one of the most popular shows on Broadway is based on the biography of Alexander Hamilton, the first United States Secretary of the Treasury. Fictional characters who engage in acts of leadership have also achieved notoriety—such as the infamous Frank Underwood from the popular television series *House of Cards* who routinely exploits others in his ascent to the Presidency, or *Madam Secretary's* Elizabeth McCord, who creatively solves international diplomacy problems as Secretary of State—reaching tens of millions of viewers. Never before in our history have people so broadly consumed stories about leadership.

Should we assume that exposure to these stories provides nothing more than entertainment value? A review of the literature implies the answer is yes, because how stories about leadership influence attitudes and behavior is a question that has been virtually ignored by scholars (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005). The present study sought to remedy this gap by examining how reading

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short stories about notable politicians might influence subsequent performance on an ethical decision-making simulation.

Social learning theory

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1971), people learn which behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate by observing, and ultimately imitating, how others behave. As demonstrated in the famous Bobo doll experiments half a century ago (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963), people tend to imitate the behavior of others, even when the behavior is observed indirectly, such as through television. A key conclusion emerging from the Bobo doll studies is that children are particularly impressionable and likely to imitate the behavior of others, including violent behavior. However, decades of research investigating social learning theory and more recent research examining the spread of ethical, or unethical, behavior have yielded two important conclusions relevant to our discussion. First, one need not be a child to be susceptible to vicarious learning effects—adults routinely imitate the unethical behavior of other adults (Robinson, Wang, & Kiewitz, 2014). Second, a number of individual differences and environmental factors, such as the salience of the individual observed, influence the extent to which observed unethical behavior is imitated (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2012; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007).

Bandura (1986) proposed that attitudes, values, and behaviors of individuals possessing high levels of status and power are more likely to be imitated by observers. Thus, prominent individuals, such as senior managers of large corporations, celebrities, and notable politicians, may represent some of the most socially salient groups influencing perceptions of ethical values and norms in organizations and society (Brown & Treviño, 2006a, 2006b; Howell & Avolio, 1992; Popper, 2013). Through their words and actions, prominent individuals send signals concerning the core values of their social groups (Dickson, Smith, Grojean, & Ehrhart, 2001). In other words, the social cues exhibited by those in power may be particularly contagious.

This conclusion is supported by a recent stream of ethical leadership research in the business domain. For example, Mayer and colleagues (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009) found evidence for a “trickle-down effect” of ethical leadership, such that perceptions of ethical leadership at the senior management level were strongly related ($r = 0.72$) with perceptions of supervisor ethical leadership, and that both levels of leadership were negatively ($r = -0.30$ s) related to employee perceptions of the frequency of coworker deviance. In another study, Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, and Kuenzi (2012) found that ethical leadership perceptions were negatively related to department managers' ratings of unit-level unethical behavior ($r = -0.20$ s). Prosocial organizational behavior designed to prevent future unethical conduct, such as internal whistleblowing, also occurs more frequently in groups supervised by more ethical managers (Mayer, Nurmohamed, Treviño, Shapiro, & Schminke, 2013).

Although the spread of misconduct within organizations is alarming, misconduct is not limited to spreading within organizations. Indeed, misconduct also appears to spread between groups through professional networks (Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010; Zuber, 2015). Distal forms of leadership, such as those exercised by high-status individuals like prominent politicians (Shamir, 1995), may influence the spread of misconduct between social groups. Always in the “public eye,” politicians act on a national or even global stage, exercising oftentimes distant, but real, power over others that cuts across organizational boundaries. Thus, the behavior of prominent politicians, whether ethical or unethical, is likely to be salient and contagious.

Stories and culture

Given these observations, an important question comes to the fore: How do the attitudes, values, and behaviors of prominent individuals spread within and between social groups? On the one hand, people might observe ethical or unethical behavior through direct interaction. However, people's perceptions of social values and norms are perhaps more shaped by indirect exposure to the attitudes, values, and behaviors of those in power through exposure to the group's climate and culture (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Kaptein, 2011; Weiss, 1978). Culture, or shared perceptions regarding attitudes and norms (Schein, 1984), provides a structure for group members to make sense of their environments.

Stories act as catalysts for culture formation and transmission among group members (Ricketts & Seiling, 2003). Those in power use stories to communicate their vision (O'Gorman & Gillespie, 2010), transfer knowledge (Janson, 2008; Janson & McQueen, 2007; Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001), develop followers (Danzig, 1997, 1999), and to help people make sense of, and adapt to, complex events (Boal & Schultz, 2007). Stories about leadership appear to take on “a life of their own,” spreading among group members and influencing culture (Parry & Hansen, 2007). Finally, it has been proposed that people may draw upon aspects of stories about prominent individuals within their social groups when forming their own self-concept, identity, or “life story” (Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005; Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Still, little is known regarding how stories become building blocks of culture or how these stories ultimately influence attitudes and behaviors (Bal, Butterman, & Bakker, 2011).

In order to investigate the influence of exposure to stories, it is necessary to define what constitutes a story. Broadly speaking, stories about leadership feature a protagonist who is engaged in the process of exercising influence over others by directing and facilitating the achievement of collective goals (Yukl, 2013). Reiser, Black, and Lehnert (1985) proposed that stories are comprised of one or more chains of cause–outcome sequences that form plot structures and are centered within a socio-emotional context. A key component of the socio-emotional context concerns the motives of the protagonist. Indeed, the goals of the protagonist oftentimes serve as the causes of the protagonist's behavior. As characterizations of reality, stories serve as simulations of the real world (Mar & Oatley, 2008). When people are engaged in the stories they are reading, theory of mind processes appear to activate that allows the reader to think and feel as they imagine the protagonist thinks and feels, as if the protagonist's motivations, beliefs, and experiences were their own (Black & Barnes, 2015; Mar, 2011). This adoption of the mental state—or decision frame—of key

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