



“I won't let you down:” Personal ethical lapses arising from women’s advocating for others

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Gender
Ethics
Negotiation
Advocacy
Anticipatory guilt

ABSTRACT

The current research examines whether women’s personal ethics are compromised when representing others in strategic interactions. Across five studies ($n = 1337$), we demonstrate that women’s ethical choices are more sensitive to whether they are representing themselves versus advocating for others compared to men’s ethical choices. We find that other-advocating women are more deceptive than self-advocating women, whereas men are just as likely to engage in morally questionable behaviors when representing themselves or others. We further show that women’s unethical behavior is driven by their anticipatory guilt as they seek to not let their constituents down in an advocacy role. Relative to men, women’s ethical behavior when advocating on behalf of others is especially likely to reflect the presumed ethical preferences of their constituents rather than solely a reflection of their own ethical preferences. Given women’s relatively high personal ethics, these results establish a risk to adopting an advocacy role for women: the social considerations inherent to advocacy put pressure on women to engage in deceptive behaviors that compromise their personal ethics.

1. Introduction

Do social considerations affect an individual’s ethics? Does this relationship differ by gender? Scholars and lay people alike have shown great interest in the notion of gender differences in ethicality (Gilligan, 1982). Over the ages, moral philosophers perpetuated the notion of gender differences in moral consciousness due to an emphasis put on reasoning in morality (for a review see Lloyd, 1983). Indeed, gender is among the most widely studied factors predicting ethical behavior (for reviews see O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). However, empirical evidence for stable gender differences in generalized moral reasoning, orientation, and judgments has been relatively sparse (Franke, Crown, & Spake, 1997; Jaffee & Hyde, 2000; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). Competitive negotiation is one domain that has yielded reliable gender differences, with men reporting lower personal ethical standards than women do (Kennedy, Kray, & Ku, 2017; Kray & Haselhuhn, 2012; Lewicki & Robinson, 1998; Robinson, Lewicki, & Donahue, 2000). This difference can be attributed to women having stronger moral identities and internalizing moral traits in their self-definitions more strongly than men do (Kennedy et al., 2017).

In the current research, we propose that advocacy role (self-advocacy versus other-advocacy) moderates the gender difference in

ethical behaviors. Given that women are more interpersonally sensitive than men (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997; Eagly, 1987; Hall, 1984)—that is they attend to other’s needs, thoughts, feelings, and reactions (Snodgrass, 1985)—women may be especially prone to feeling guilty about letting others down as they seek to satisfy the preferences and meet the expectations of their constituents. In fact, women have significantly higher scores on guilt proneness than men (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011). We propose that women’s greater interpersonal sensitivity can manifest in greater anticipatory guilt at the thought of letting their constituents down, and this in turn can increase the prevalence of deceptive behavior in strategic interactions such as competitive negotiations by women who are representing others.

Due to the social and interpersonal nature of guilt, it functions to reinforce the communal norm of attention to others’ needs (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Morris & Keltner, 2000). In other words, guilt “happens between people rather than just inside them” (p. 243). As a result, we expect anticipatory guilt to shape women’s ethical behavior particularly when negotiators represent the interests of other parties, suppressing the baseline gender difference in ethical behavior in negotiations (Kennedy et al., 2017). In other words, the ethical advantage that women have in personal negotiations is mitigated in situations in which they act on behalf of others who prefer that they do what it takes to maximize their gains. While women internalize moral

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traits in their self-definitions more than men do, the salience of moral traits in the self-concept varies across situational contexts (Kennedy et al., 2017). Separately, research has found that advocacy roles release social constraints that can prevent women from negotiating assertively (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Bowles, Babcock, & McGinn, 2005). Because women have less worry about violating gender role expectations when they act assertively on behalf of others than when they do so on their own behalf, adopting an advocacy role has been shown to improve women's economic performance. Here, departing from and extending previous work, we suggest that adopting an advocacy role has a potential downside by promoting deception in women who seek to meet the expectations of constituents who may prefer that their representatives act dishonestly to maximize their personal gains.

If advocacy implies that negotiators should do whatever it takes to benefit their constituents, then negotiators with greater interpersonal sensitivity may anticipate guilt at the thought of maintaining more stringent ethical standards than their constituents would desire. Women's greater interpersonal sensitivity may lead them to perceive their advocacy role differently than men do, and to face a different situation (one that poses more of a conflict with their personal ethics) than what men experience given men's greater egocentrism and leniency with regard to ethics in strategic interactions (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2012). As a result, women advocating for others may be especially likely to reduce their personal ethics to comply with the perceived role requirements. In other words, women may be more likely than men to adopt the ethical preferences of their constituents rather than rely solely on their own ethical preferences when acting on behalf of others. To get at the role of ethical preferences of constituents, relying on past work that shows negotiators believe that male constituents expect them to bargain harder than do female constituents (Pruitt, Carnevale, Forcey, & Van Slyck, 1986) and the robust evidence that women have higher standards of ethicality in negotiations (Kennedy et al., 2017), we assume that the gender of agents interacts with the gender of their constituents, such that female negotiators in an other-advocacy role attempt to negotiate in a way that meets the needs and desires of their constituents, thus engaging in more deceptive behaviors when representing men as compared to women.

Most of the work in the behavioral ethics literature has adopted an interactionist model (e.g., Trevino, 1986) positing that individual behavior is a product of personal attributes and context. In fact, gender differences in negotiator ethics have been shown to be contextually bound (Kennedy et al., 2017; Mazei et al., 2015). Our objectives in this article are to advance the understanding of situational factors influencing whether gender differences emerge in negotiators' deceptive behaviors and to understand the intra-psychological dynamics that influence these processes. To do so, we draw from the literature showing gender differences in interpersonal sensitivity (Cross & Madson, 1997; Eagly, 1987) and the effect of ethical preferences of third-party beneficiaries on ethical decision-making (Wiltermuth, Bennett, & Pierce, 2013). We investigate how social considerations encourage different behaviors for women compared to men. Whereas past research has mainly focused on a positive economic consequence of advocacy roles for women negotiators (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Bowles et al., 2005), here we examine a potentially negative ethical consequence of women's negotiating on behalf of others. Finally, we focus on the social function of guilt and its potential role in promoting dishonesty; guilt is most often studied as a way of regulating behavior in a more pro-social and ethical direction (Cohen et al., 2011), yet here we suggest that guilt can also elicit unethical behavior in service of others.

2. Gender and advocacy role

Early ethical theorists proposed that people develop moral reasoning abilities in six stages (Kohlberg, 1969, 1976). Pre-conventional moral reasoning describes moral reasoning based on consequences, either avoiding punishments (stage 1) or obtaining rewards (stage 2). In

conventional reasoning, moral reasons are based on consensus (i.e., following others' expectations, including social norms; stage 3) and conformity to rules (i.e., law and order; stage 4). And in the most advanced level, post-conventional reasoning, moral reasoning is based on independent standards deduced from either perceived social contracts (stage 5) or universal ethical principles (stage 6). Although Kohlberg's work had no specific implications for the role of gender in moral development, follow-up work by Carol Gilligan (1982) criticized Kohlberg's stages of moral development to be male-oriented. She argued that males and females are socialized differently and as such women have a care-based moral orientation that prioritizes relationships and others' needs whereas men have a justice-based orientation that emphasizes fairness and equity more. Empirical evidence supports reliable but small gender differences in generalized moral orientation and judgments (Franke et al., 1997; Jaffee & Hyde, 2000), suggesting gender differences may be situationally-determined. One situational context in which gender differences have robustly emerged is in rating the appropriateness of ethically questionable negotiating tactics (Kennedy et al., 2017; Kray & Haselhuhn, 2012; Lewicki & Robinson, 1998; Robinson et al., 2000). This difference has been attributed to men being more egocentric than women (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2012), the masculine stereotyped nature of the task (Kray, Kennedy, & Van Zant, 2014), and women possessing stronger moral identities (Kennedy et al., 2017). However, the social considerations inherent to advocacy pose a different set of social constraints for women, increasing pressure that can cause them to relax their personal ethical standards in order to serve others.

Past research has mainly focused on advocacy roles promoting effective negotiating by releasing social constraints that can prevent women from negotiating assertively (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Bowles et al., 2005). When women act as advocates for others, they negotiate as assertively as men do, and the gender gap in performance disappears (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Bowles et al., 2005). The moderating effect of advocacy role on gender differences in negotiation performance has been explained by deeply ingrained cultural stereotypes portraying men as agentic and women as communal (Eagly, 1987). Such stereotypes not only describe behavioral differences, they also prescribe and proscribe behavior (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), delineating which behaviors men and women are required to and prohibited from displaying. Amanatullah and Morris (2010) demonstrated that in self-advocacy situations, women anticipate that assertiveness, as a stereotypically male behavior that contradicts communal prescriptions, will evoke role incongruity evaluations and backlash, thus they limit their assertiveness. However, this line of research has focused exclusively on assertive behavior and the performance benefits of advocacy roles. Given that competition can be indistinguishable from unethical behavior (Schweitzer, DeChurch, & Gibson, 2005), advocacy role can influence women's ethicality when representing others, thus we examine whether advocacy roles are not without their drawbacks.

Human relationships are based on the assumption of mutual concern, and guilt is the primary affective mechanism for ensuring that people adhere to the standards of interpersonal sensitivity and concern for others (Baumeister et al., 1994). Past research has focused on the social and interpersonal nature of guilt (Baumeister et al., 1994; Haidt, 2003; Morris & Keltner, 2000). In addition, research on anticipatory emotions (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007) suggests that the feelings that people expect to experience play an important role in shaping their behaviors. Men and women may perceive advocacy roles differently. Namely, women who are more relational and interpersonally sensitive put aside their personal preference when representing someone else and adopt the constituent's preferences and act in line with those. On the other hand, men who have been shown to be more egocentric, advocate in an identical manner to what they would have done for themselves. As such, given that women are more concerned about others' expectations (Cross & Madson, 1997) and focus on those expectations particularly in an advocacy role, we expect

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