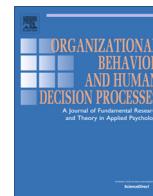




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Duty orientation: Theoretical development and preliminary construct testing

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ABSTRACT

We develop and test the construct of *duty orientation* that we propose is valuable to advancing knowledge about ethical behavior in organizations. Duty orientation represents an individual's volitional orientation to loyally serve and faithfully support other members of the group, to strive and sacrifice to accomplish the tasks and missions of the group, and to honor its codes and principles. We test the construct validity and predictive validity of a measure of duty orientation across five studies and six samples. Consistent with the conceptualization of duty orientation as a malleable construct, we found in separate field studies that duty orientation mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical and unethical behaviors, and between transformational leadership and ethical behavior. In predicting ethical and unethical behavior, duty orientation demonstrated incremental predictive validity beyond the effects of affective organizational commitment, organizational identification, experienced job responsibility, collective self-construal, and organizational values congruence.

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Introduction

Numerous theories of behavioral ethics have sought to describe how the ethical orientations and capacities of autonomous moral actors, such as their levels of cognitive moral development and values and beliefs, influence their ethical judgments and behaviors (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Scholars have argued that considering individuals as autonomous moral actors is incomplete, however, as doing so neglects individuals' orientations toward their moral obligations and duties to their groups (e.g., Folger, 2012; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Scanlon, 1998). Schwartz (1983), for example, called attention to what he described as the neglect of "the psychology of obligation" (p. 205). Schwartz' intention was to resurrect the concept of obligation as an explanatory

framework for work behavior. From this perspective, employees act on the basis of responsibilities, obligations, and group moral imperatives that supersede their self-interest. Yet while scholars acknowledge that a greater understanding of duty in organizations is needed, there is a paucity of theoretical development, and to our knowledge little empirical work, in this direction. To begin to address this neglected area of research, we develop the construct *duty orientation* and test its construct validity. In doing so, we seek to encourage inquiry into the etiology of duty and how it influences ethical thoughts and behaviors.

We define *duty orientation* as an individual's volitional orientation to loyally serve and faithfully support other members of the group, to strive and sacrifice to accomplish the tasks and missions of the group, and to honor its codes and principles. We propose that people with a high orientation toward duty will tend to think about and make judgments on ethical issues through the lens of their duties to their group, and they will have greater volition to behave in a manner that is consistent with those duties. Commensurate with this definition, we propose that duty orientation is reflected in three dimensions: to loyally serve and faithfully support other members

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of the group (duty to members), to strive and sacrifice to accomplish the tasks and missions that the group faces (duty to mission), and to honor the codes and principles of the group (duty to codes). We draw from deontology theory (Folger, 2012), moral philosophy, and moral psychology (e.g., Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Sherman, 1997; Shweder, 1999; Wallace, 1996; Wren, 1991, 2010) to form the conceptual basis for duty orientation. Scholars have suggested that such fusing of philosophy and moral psychology is necessary to develop new lines of thinking in behavioral ethics research (Killen & Smetana, 2008; Lapsley & Power, 2005; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009).

According to Folger (2012), “Deontology (a neologism) is derived from the Greek *deon*, referring to duty or obligation. The significance for morality comes from the additional translation as that which is binding or proper, thereby also implying accountability” (p. 123). The psychological state of deontology is aroused “when a situation brings to bear beliefs about the relevance of moral directives...” and “...represents the instigation of an “ought force” (Heider, 1958, p. 234) that calls for self-restraint rather than unfettered choice” (Folger, 2012, p. 124). Deontology thus creates *bounded autonomy*, a sense of constrained free choice that is created by an orientation toward dutifully fulfilling obligations (Folger, Ganegoda, Rice, Taylor, & Wo, 2013). Duty-related concepts, such as loyalty, honor, and code, are grounded in a commitment to the ethics of one’s community in which individuals conceive of themselves as office holders with certain obligations and responsibilities to the larger group (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010, p. 822; Shweder, 1999). From this perspective, ethical choices are driven in part by evaluating their consistency with the obligations group membership entails (Kekes, 1986; March & Weil, 2005).

We suggest that a focus on duty orientation (DO, hereafter) contributes to the understanding of behavioral ethics in five ways. First, the role that obligation toward duties plays in moral functioning has been relatively neglected in modern and postmodern theories of psychology and organizational behavior. The literature has instead emphasized an *ethics of autonomy* which conceptualizes the self as an autonomous agent with certain individual preferences and rights (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Schwartz, 1983; Shweder, 1999). An ethics of autonomy is reflected in concepts such as self-authorship, self-actualization, and post-conventional cognitive moral development—all of which purport to reflect pinnacles of human experience and development (Kegan, 1994; Kohlberg, 1981; Maslow, 1954; Rest, 1986). While these concepts are important, they overlook the ways in which autonomy and individual choice are bounded by individuals’ sense of duty to the group and its collective goals and aspirations.

Second, we propose that DO can advance our understanding of the mechanisms through which leadership affects behavior in organizations. Following Schwartz (1983), Shamir (1990, 1991) called attention to deficiencies in theories of work behavior that rely on individualistic–hedonistic assumptions and over-emphasize cognitive-calculative processes. He called for theories that can “explain individual sacrifices for collective concerns and can account for the role of values and moral obligations in energizing and directing work behavior” (Shamir, 1991, p. 410). Shamir’s comments suggest that neglecting concepts such as duty and obligation in work behavior theories creates gaps in our understanding of certain leadership phenomena, such as the extraordinary influence of transformational leaders on followers’ behavior. As noted by Shamir (1991), leaders’ ability to “persuade followers to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the team, the organization or some other collective” cannot be explained without recourse to a psychology of obligation (p. 407; cf. Schwartz, 1983; Shamir, 1990). In consideration of its potential contribution to leadership theory and research, one contribution of our paper lies in testing exemplary forms of leadership – transformational leadership (Bass,

1985) and ethical leadership (Brown Treviño, & Harrison, 2005) – as antecedents to DO.

Third, a substantial portion of the behavioral ethics literature is based on paradigms of fairness, justice, and benevolence (for discussion see Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Taylor, 1989). For example, Kohlberg declared that his theory of cognitive moral development is restricted “to the form or cognitive-structural stage of moral judgment as embodied in judgments of justice” (1986, p. 499). Aquino and Reed’s (2002) theory of moral identity, as another example, focuses on nine traits, including being caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest and kind. Whereas theories drawing from paradigms of fairness, justice, and benevolence have enhanced understanding of moral reasoning and behavior (Rai & Fiske, 2011), we suggest that ethical omissions and commissions are also driven by perceptions of moral obligations, and that these perceptions may be influenced by antecedents that are distinct from those that have been implicated in research on justice and benevolence.

Fourth, as noted by Reynolds (2008), behavioral ethics research has tended to focus on ethical decision-making (cf. Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Yet, ethical judgments are only weakly related to actual ethical behavior, suggesting that other factors have a disproportionate influence on ethical behavior (Blasi, 1980; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990). DO may be one such factor. Kohlberg and Candee (1984) noted that personal responsibility must first be formed before individuals fully deliberate and take action on their ethical judgments. Similarly, Blasi (1983, 1984, 1993) theorized that before taking moral action, an individual first considers whether he or she has a personal moral responsibility to act. Thus, a personal sense of duty promotes moral agency. If an individual is highly driven by moral obligations and duties, there may in some cases be no ethical judgment to be made, only a personally felt necessity to fulfill one’s duty (Colby & Damon, 1992; Wren, 2010). For example, if a detective belongs to a precinct with strong codes against abusing or forcing confessions from suspects, and he or she holds high DO related to the precinct’s codes, he or she would have little need to deliberate on whether it is proper or not to force a confession from a suspect—obligations to the group simply prohibit that behavior.

Fifth, the majority of research has defined and operationalized ethical behavior in ways that do not account for the more virtuous forms of behaviors. For example, Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds defined ethical behavior as “those acts that reach some minimal moral standard and are therefore not unethical, such as honesty or obeying the law” (2006, p. 52). Hannah and Avolio argue, however, that researchers “should more fully investigate the criterion space that lies beyond transactional ethical behavior—what we might call extra-ethical, or simply virtuous behavior” (2011, p. 991). We believe that investigating DO and its correlates will aid scholars in developing models that predict aspects of ethical behavior that extend beyond minimal compliance, such as the virtuous behaviors often seen in nurses who strive to meet the moral obligations of their profession.

We first develop the etiology and conceptual basis for DO and describe its components. We then discuss how DO is distinguished from conceptually related constructs. Next, we develop hypotheses predicting that ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005) and transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) are antecedents of DO, as well as hypotheses predicting relationships between DO and ethical and unethical behaviors. We then describe the development of a measure of DO and test its psychometric properties and validity in five samples of organizational employees. Finally, we test our hypotheses in three organizational samples. Ultimately, our goal is to initiate a line of inquiry into the role of DO in reducing unethical behavior and inspiring exemplary behavior.

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