Does Honesty–Humility influence evaluations of leadership emergence? The mediating role of moral disengagement

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A B S T R A C T

The present study examined the relationship between Honesty–Humility and leadership emergence. We proposed that individuals who are low on Honesty–Humility would be more likely to utilize moral disengagement. In turn, moral disengagement would be negatively related to perceptions of leadership emergence. The hypotheses were tested using a multi-source, time-lagged cross-sectional research design. Data were collected from two samples of undergraduate business students working in groups of 4–6 ($N = 237$ and $N = 209$). The results generally showed that Honesty–Humility did not have a significant direct effect on leadership emergence. However, bootstrapping analyses revealed that individuals with low levels of Honesty–Humility were more likely to utilize moral disengagement, which, in turn, resulted in lower self- and peer evaluations of leadership emergence. These observed indirect effects of Honesty–Humility on leadership emergence through moral disengagement were fully replicated in the second sample. The present study also demonstrated the usefulness of the HEXACO model for understanding individual differences in moral disengagement. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Decades of research support the importance of personality in understanding leadership emergence – that is, the likelihood of being perceived as a leader in a leaderless group (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986). Although early researchers examined a myriad of individual difference variables, their endeavors generally met with limited success until the introduction of the Big Five model of personality (Goldberg, 1990). For instance, Judge et al. (2002) used meta-analytic procedures to show that Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability are associated with leadership emergence. More recently, Ensari, Riggio, Christian, and Carslaw (2011) conducted a meta-analytic review of leadership emergence within the Leaderless Group Discussion context – an employee selection procedure where job candidates participate in leaderless groups to discuss and solve problems. In addition to replicating the findings observed for the Big Five traits, Ensari et al. showed that non-Big Five traits such as authoritarianism, masculinity, and self-esteem/self efficacy are also predictive of leadership emergence (see also Lord et al.'s (1986) meta-analytic review). Other studies have similarly reported links between leadership emergence and non-Big Five traits such as self-monitoring and narcissism (Brunell et al., 2008; Day, Schleicher, Unckless, & Hiller, 2002). The research to date therefore suggests the usefulness of examining personality traits that predict leadership emergence beyond the Big Five framework.

A growing body of research indicates that personality may be investigated using an alternate six-factor structure known as the HEXACO model (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Although there are a few marked differences between the two models, the inclusion of the sixth factor, labeled Honesty–Humility, represents the most significant addition to the HEXACO model. Individuals high on Honesty–Humility are sincere, fair-minded, and modest, whereas individuals low in Honesty–Humility tend to be manipulative, insincere, greedy, and pretentious (Ashton & Lee, 2007). To date, there has been no research exploring leadership emergence within the HEXACO framework, despite the centrality of Honesty–Humility in understanding many interpersonally-oriented outcomes (e.g., Hilbig & Zettler, 2009; O'Neill, Lewis, & Carswell, 2011; Wiltshire, Bourdage, & Lee, 2013). Thus, the present research sought to examine the link between Honesty–Humility and leadership emergence. We propose that Honesty–Humility is related to leadership emergence indirectly through a construct called *moral disengagement* (Bandura, 1999). Specifically, we propose that individuals low on Honesty–Humility should be less likely to emerge as leaders, due to an increased tendency to utilize moral disengagement.

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1.1. Honesty–Humility in the leadership emergence context

An interesting observation is that the four Big Five traits that have been linked to leadership emergence have readily observable behavioral manifestations during interpersonal interactions. Extraversion and similar traits, for instance, engender behaviors such as dominating social interactions, liveliness, assertiveness, and high energy. Similarly, the planning, initiative-taking, persistence, and task-oriented behaviors of Conscientious individuals are likely to differentiate them from others which, according to Judge et al. (2002), "... may allow such individuals to quickly emerge as leaders" (p. 773). Individuals high on Emotional Stability also demonstrate observable behaviors in the form of emotional composure, high self-confidence, and self-esteem. A similar argument can be made for non-Big Five correlates of leadership emergence, such as authoritarianism and masculinity. Thus, following group formation, it is likely to take only a relatively short time to notice individuals with high levels of these traits that ultimately influence perceptions of leadership emergence.

In contrast, the behavioral manifestations of Honesty–Humility are likely to be relatively hidden during initial interpersonal interactions. Persons with low levels of Honesty–Humility tend to exhibit behavioral tendencies such as insincerity, manipulativeness, fraudulence, and pretentiousness. Such behaviors are generally not discernible to the average, untrained observer, particularly after only a brief interaction. The same can be said of the behavioral tendencies of a person who is honest, sincere, modest, and trustworthy. Roulin, Bangerter, and Levashina (in press) have provided some empirical evidence in support of this proposition. Using signal detection, Roulin and colleagues found that individuals were not able to accurately judge honest or deceptive behaviors in an interview context. Thus, an individual's level of (dis) honesty, (in) sincerity, and (un) willingness to manipulate others or engage in fraudulent activities may only be known after a long period of time and after several opportunities to observe the individual across different situations. Perhaps not surprisingly, agreement between self- and peer reports of Honesty–Humility appears to be somewhat dependent on the level of acquaintanceship between the raters (Lee & Ashton, 2012). Moreover, individuals who are low on Honesty–Humility have a tendency to engage in impression management behaviors (Bourdage, Lee, Lee, & Shin, 2012; Wiltshire et al., 2013). Impression managers tend to hide their negative characteristics and attempt to present themselves in a favorable light. This makes it even more difficult to accurately determine whether a person is low on Honesty–Humility.

The issue of the discernibility of a person's level of Honesty–Humility is important because, in the leadership emergence context, attributions of emerging leadership are often made within relatively short time frames, and typically among individuals who are less acquainted with each other. In such contexts, peers should be less capable of differentiating fellow group members who are low on Honesty–Humility from those who are higher on the trait. As such, evaluations of leadership emergence are less likely to be made on the basis of knowledge of the ratee's standing on this trait. In other words, Honesty–Humility should not be directly associated with leadership emergence. However, we argue below that Honesty–Humility may be indirectly implicated in understanding leadership emergence perceptions through a socio-cognitive mechanism known as *moral disengagement* (Bandura, 1999).

1.2. The indirect effect of Honesty–Humility through moral disengagement

Moral disengagement explains how people come to engage in detrimental conducts that are otherwise incongruent with their moral standards (Bandura, 1999). People *disengage* their moral standards from detrimental conduct in order to avoid feeling guilty about their actions (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Bandura (1999) has described several mechanisms of moral disengagement, such as moral justification (cognitively misconstruing harm to others so as to seem morally justifiable), euphemistic labeling (using morally neutral diction to make harmful conduct seem less threatening), advantageous comparison (making a deviant conduct seem less harmful by comparing it to more injurious actions), and misrepresentation of harm (minimizing, forgetting, or even actively discrediting evidence of harm caused to others) (Bandura et al., 1996; Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008).

Individuals who are low on Honesty–Humility should be more likely to utilize moral disengagement tactics. This is because low Honesty–Humility is associated with increased levels of a variety of unethical tendencies, such as sexual harassment, deviant behaviors at work, cheating, unethical business decision making, and propensity to be involved in criminal activities (Hershfield, Cohen, & Thompson, 2012; Lee, Ashton, Morrison, Cordery, & Dunlop, 2008; Lee, Gizzarone, & Ashton, 2003; Van Gelder & De Vries, 2012). From a theoretical perspective, therefore, individuals who are low on Honesty–Humility should be more likely to utilize moral disengagement tactics in order to avoid self-sanctions and minimize feelings of guilt associated with these negative behaviors. It is likely easier for a low Honesty–Humility individual to "live with" cheating or making unethical business decisions if s/he reasons, for instance, that other people are doing worse things (i.e., advantageous comparison) or that engaging in such conduct is being "business savvy" (i.e., euphemistic labeling). This reasoning is supported by recent research showing a moderate, negative relationship ($r = -.40$) between Honesty–Humility and moral disengagement (Ogunfowora, Bourdage, & Nguyen, 2013).

Interestingly, research indicates that individuals who utilize moral disengagement tend to be low on altruism, an attribute that is unlikely to bode well in group work settings. Moral disengagers often make decisions that are self-serving and generally refrain from prosocial behaviors (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Bandura et al., 1996; Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). Bandura et al. (1996, 2001), for instance, showed that children and young adolescents who utilize moral disengagement tactics were rated by multiple sources – including the self, peers, teachers, and parents – as engaging in significantly fewer prosocial behaviors such as helpfulness, sharing, and kindness. Moore and colleagues similarly found that morally disengaging adults were more likely to make self-interested workplace decisions at the expense of others. Thus, according to Bandura and colleagues, it appears that "moral disengagement mechanisms... are not conducive to prosocial relationships" (Bandura et al., 2001, pp. 126–127).

We therefore propose that moral disengagement should be negatively associated with perceptions of leadership emergence. Moral disengagers should engender negative perceptions from their peers because of their unwillingness to help and work cooperatively with others. Since effective coordination of activities and cooperation among group members are crucial to group effectiveness – research shows that units perform better when members cooperate and help each other (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Guzzo & Shea, 1992; Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997) – moral disengagers should be seen as impediments to the group's success. Thus, group members should be less likely to perceive moral disengagers as emerging leaders. This proposition is indirectly supported by Bandura et al.'s (1996) finding that moral disengagement is associated with greater social rejection by one's peers. Although this finding was observed in a sample of elementary and junior high students, we believe that adult moral