Moral foundations theory and followers' perception of ethical leadership: The two possible
perception errors

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Abstract: Moral foundations theory has been applied to guide the research of the social psychology of morality, but has yet been introduced to the study of ethical leadership. In this review, the author first reviewed the major arguments of moral foundations theory. Second, based on moral foundations theory, the author proposed what leaders may do to establish their own ethical leadership and what criteria followers base on to judge their leader's behaviors. Third, the author predicted the possible errors that may happen in followers' perception of ethical leadership. Finally, the author made suggestions for future studies.

Keywords: moral foundations theory, ethical leadership, cultural difference, ideology, gender

1. Introduction

“Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make love?” (Haidt, 2001: 814)

This dilemma involves a scenario depicting a harmless wrong, where although the incest behavior is against human ethics, it enhanced Julie and Mark’s relationship, and its potential harm was controlled to the minimum. This dilemma exhibits the conflicts between the moral judgments based on purity and harm, which are two of the moral foundations (MF) in the moral foundations theory (MFT). There was no harm caused by the incest; therefore, the incest is not immoral. However, the incest itself is a violation of human ethics, and hence should be considered as immoral. MFT explains the basis and the root of individuals’ moral judgment (Graham et al., 2011, 2013). It understands morality from the perspective of the social intuitionist model and evolutionary psychology, underscoring the intuitive nature of moral judgment and the adaptive function of morality. The main argument of this theory is that the first draft of morality, shared by every individual, is written in genes encoding the early experience of our ancestors. The uniqueness of everyone’s moral standards derives from each individual’s distinct experience. There are five moral foundations, care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and purity/degradation. The five moral foundations compose individuals’ moral intuition. MFT has been widely applied to guiding the research of

the social psychology of morality (Boer & Fischer, 2013; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012; Waytz, Dungan, & Young, 2013). However, it has yet been used to direct the study of ethical leadership in organizational psychology, which will be the focus of this review.

According to Brown, Treviño, and Harrison's (2005) definition of ethical leadership (EL), to become an ethical leader, one first has to behave in ways regarded as moral by his/her followers, and second, has to effectively increase followers' moral behaviors. This definition includes two components of EL, the moral person component and the moral manager component. The moral person component is particularly determined by followers' perception of morality, which can be largely determined by both leaders' and followers' MFs.

The author argues that there are two prerequisites for followers to perceive the leader as an ethical leader. First, the leader has to behave ethically according to his/her own perception of morality. Second, leaders' behaviors attempting to establish EL have to be judged as moral by followers as well. The author proposes that MFs can impact both the formation of leaders' ethical behaviors and followers' judgment of leaders' ethical behaviors. Moreover, MF can also predict the errors in followers' perception of EL. In this review, the author will summarize previous research on followers' perception of EL, introduce MFT, and indicate how MFT can be used to explain followers' perception of EL and the possible errors in followers' perception.

1.1 Previous research on followers' perception of EL

Brown and Treviño (2006) applied the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) to accounting for both the formation of leaders' ethical behaviors and followers' perception of ethical behaviors. The social learning theory states that individuals acquire their behaviors either by their observation and emulation of their role models' behaviors, or by vicarious

reinforcement. Vicarious reinforcement refers to the formation or abandon of behaviors by observing the consequences of others' behaviors in a group. Based on the social learning theory, Brown and Treviño (2006) proposed three factors shaping followers' perception of EL, ethical role modeling, the moral context of the organization, and the moral intensity of the focal issue. The first factor determines the formation of leaders' moral behaviors, and the latter two factors influence followers' judgment of EL.

zEthical role modeling impacts the formation of leaders' ethical behaviors. Brown and Treviño (2006) argue that the formation of a leader's ethical behaviors relies on the leader's social emulation of his/her mentor. Brown and Treviño (2014) found a positive correlation between the experience of having had an ethical mentor and the leader's followers' rating of EL. The effect of ethical mentorship is stronger on elder leaders, and the effect of childhood ethical mentorship is stronger on younger leaders. (Because the evidence they provided is a conference paper, I can't find the original paper to read it and examine its validity, so I found this paper and did not use their evidence.)

The moral context of the organization can increase or decrease a leader's ethical behaviors by social emulation or vicarious reinforcement. In a moral environment, a leader can learn how to deal with situations ethically, and ethical behaviors are encouraged. Therefore, a moral environment can create an optimal atmosphere for leaders to acquire ethical behaviors through social learning. Moreover, a moral environment is also beneficial to the maintenance of EL—leaders who already established EL would feel comfortable working in a moral environment. An immoral environment is the opposite. It discourages ethical behaviors, sets unethical examples of how to deal with different situations, and is detrimental to leaders' maintenance of ethical behaviors.

The moral intensity of the focal moral issue impacts followers' attention to leaders' ethical behaviors. Brown and Treviño (2006) propose that the more likely an event can cause harm, the more morally intense the event is, and the more it draws followers' attention. Followers' attention can exaggerate the effect of leaders' behaviors on the establishment of EL. Under followers' attention, if the leader deals with the issue wisely and exhibits ethical personality, he/she will be more likely to be considered as an ethical leader. If he/she does not handle the situation well, his/her poor performance will cause more harm to the establishment of EL.

The moral intensity of the focal issue can interact with the moral context of the organization to influence followers' perception of EL. Specifically, an ethical context can prepare the leader better for the resolution of ethical issues and hence make it easier for the leader to be perceived as an ethical leader, whereas an unethical context is detrimental to the leader's acquisition of the skills for the resolution of ethical issues and hence make it difficult for the leader to be perceived as an ethical leader.

1.2 Moral foundations theory

MFT states that there are five foundations of morality, care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and purity/degradation (Graham et al., 2011, 2013; Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). Individuals' moral intuition is established on the basis on the five MFs.

MFT states that the care/harm foundation roots from our ancestors' experience of attending their own offspring. Those who possess the ability to sense others' pain and the willingness to help others in trouble would be more sensitive to their children's need and hence would offer better care to their children, whereas those who are indifferent to others' pain and

readily cause harm to others tend to be terrible care-givers. Therefore, it is beneficial for the survival of the species to let individuals who are more caring have better reputation and hence occupy more resource, by judging those who are protective and caring towards the weak as moral and judging those who are cruel and harmful to others as immoral. Agreeableness can hence be an important antecedent of EL. An agreeable person is often regarded as prosocial and tends to be empathetic towards others' sorrow (Thompson, 2008). Therefore, guided by the care foundation, leaders who attempt to establish EL may try to appear agreeable, and followers would also judge agreeable leaders as ethical leaders. Moreover, the author posits that the relationship between agreeableness and EL can be moderated by the context of the organization. In organizations where aggressiveness and competition are most valued, a leader's manifestation of agreeableness might be considered as a sign of weakness and hence harmful to the formation of EL, whereas in organizations where a cooperative and cozy atmosphere is most valued, a leader's manifestation of kindness is likely to be beneficial to the formation of EL.

MFT states that the fairness/cheating foundation roots from our ancestors' experience of cooperation. Cooperation is essential for our ancestors to fight against their hostile living environment. Since cheating can cause distrust and harm cooperation, it is detrimental for the survival of our ancestors if everyone tries to cheat in order to occupy more resource. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage fairness and discourage cheating by judging fairness as moral and cheating as immoral, which is the basis of the fairness foundation. Guided by the fairness foundation, leaders who actively attempt to establish EL may try to exhibit fairness in their everyday conducts, and followers may also judge the morality of leaders' behaviors based on how fair/unfair they think the behaviors are.

MFT states that the loyalty/betrayal foundation roots from our ancestors' experience of competition and ally formation. A tribe with loyal members and loyal allies is more competitive in the hostile environment and hence has larger chance of survival. Moreover, loyalty is the prerequisite of trust. Therefore, the loyal foundation was developed. Guided by the loyal foundation, leaders who attempt to form EL may work hard and are committed to the success of the company. Moreover, they would be loyal to their followers. They may try to defend their followers when their followers are in trouble and support their followers in public. Followers may also judge their leaders based on how loyal to them they perceive their leaders to be.

MFT states that the authority/subversion foundation roots from the hierarchical structure of human society. Subversion has a long history of being severely punished by those in power, whereas those who act in accordance to the hierarchical system's requirements are usually rewarded with abundant resource by those in power. Moreover, those in power must exhibit authority to their own followers as a sign of strong leadership, otherwise they might be considered as a poor leader and unsuitable for the position. Trained by the punishment to subversion and the reward of obeying the rules of the hierarchical system, our ancestor developed the authority foundation, which values the ability of engaging in social interaction diplomatically in a hierarchy system. As a leader, one needs to behave properly to demonstrate authority, and as a follower, one needs to respect his/her leader. The deviation of this requirement would be judged as immoral. (I didn't respect the original authors' understanding here. I feel they didn't explain the root of this foundation well. But I'm not sure if this is ok.)

MFT states that the purity/degradation foundation roots from our ancestors' instinct to avoid disease. Behaviors signifying degradation, such as incest, sexual indulgence, and being unhygienic are likely to cause the spread of disease and endanger the survival of the species. The

aversion to impurity can be generalized to the aversion to the violation of social norms and virtues, such as using national flag to mop the floor and eating one's dead dog (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008). In the context of an organization, the purity foundation may manifest in the hatred towards corruption and scandals and the praise of respecting social norms. Leaders who attempt to demonstrate EL may stay honest and be away from corruption and scandals, and followers would judge their leaders by considering whether their leaders are honorable and respectful.

However, the hypotheses above do not always hold, since they are based on the assumption that leaders and followers possess the same MFs. In fact, people with different cultural background or from different social groups may possess different MFs. When leaders and their own followers' understandings of morality do not meet, followers would not perceive their leader's behaviors as moral even if their leader thinks that he/she is doing moral things. Moreover, it is also possible that followers would perceive their leader's behavior as immoral even if their leader thinks his/her own behaviors are morally irrelevant. These two errors will be discussed in the following section.

2. Errors in followers' perception of EL

In the following section, the author will discuss the individual and cultural difference in MFs. The author proposes two errors that are likely to happen in followers' perception of EL. First, followers may not perceive the leader as a moral leader even if the leader thinks that he/she has performed morally (error 1). Second, followers may judge the leader as immoral even if the leader does not think he/she did something wrong (error 2). The author posits that error 1 and error 2 can occur when leaders and followers possess different political views, different cultural backgrounds, or different genders.

2.1 When leaders and followers are from different culture

As MFT states, human morality is a combination of genetic inheritance and the influence of cultural factors. Different culture may value different MFs differently. Graham et al. (2011) found that the eastern-western cultural difference mainly lies in the purity and the loyalty foundations, with eastern culture cares more about purity and loyalty than western culture does.

This cultural difference can cause error 1 when leaders endorse MFs that they value but are not valued as much by their followers who are from a different culture. For example, an eastern leader who demonstrate his/her EL only by avoiding sexual scandals may still consider him/herself as an ethical leader because of it, but his/her western followers may not. A western leader who practices care to employees may consider it as an evidence of EL but his/her eastern employees may think care is not the most important criterion of EL.

This cultural difference can cause error 2 when leaders violate MF that they care little but are highly endorsed by their followers. For example, a western leader may consider a slight violation of purity—breaking a small promise without big consequences—as a small issue, but his/her eastern followers may still criticize him/her harshly.

Nonetheless, the author thinks the conclusion that eastern culture endorses authority not as much as it endorses the purity and the loyalty foundations is questionable. Hofstede (2001) studied the perception of power distance by different countries. He defined power distance as “the extent to which the lower ranking individuals of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2001: 98). The higher the country’s power distance index (PDI), the more the country’s citizens endorse social hierarchy. He found that generally, Asian countries (e.g. Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia) scored higher than North American countries (Canada and US) and European countries (UK and Finland) in PDI, which means that

people in eastern culture typically accept the existence of social hierarchy and expect others to accept it as well. This likely indicates that people in eastern culture has a high endorsement to the authority foundation. Therefore, future research can consider further examining the difference between western and eastern culture in the authority foundation.

The possible risk of running a study testing the followers' perceptual error of EL is that the cultural difference in MF might be not enough to cause followers' perception errors. Cultural effect might be detectable in large scale surveys but subtle in lab settings. Though significantly different in the t-tests, the eastern-western cultural difference in MF was slight in terms of mean difference (maximum mean difference = .25, Graham et al., 2011). The significant differences in the t-tests were hence likely caused by large sample size—104,893 western participants and 2,258 eastern participants rather than large effect size. Moreover, in Graham et al.'s (2011) study, there was no evidence showing any MF is not endorsed by any culture. Both western and eastern cultures were actually found to endorse all five MFs—behaviors obeying any MFs would be considered as moral by both cultures and behaviors violating any MF would be criticized by both cultures. The cultural difference probably only lies in how forgiving a culture is to violations. Eastern culture endorsed MF higher than western culture across the five dimensions of MF (Graham et al., 2011). It was just that the difference in the purity and the loyalty foundations was larger. This may indicate that western followers forgive leaders' transgressions easier than eastern followers. Therefore, the leader's transgressions may have less negative effect on western followers' perception of his/her EL than on eastern followers' perception of his/her EL. Future research may find it more promising to test the validity of cultural difference in forgiving than to test cultural difference in MFs. Western followers may be more readily to forgive their leader's

mistakes and hence more likely to perceive their leaders as ethical leaders compared to eastern followers.

If future research wants to test the effect of cultural difference on followers' errors in EL perception, the author proposes that perception errors are more likely to be detected in cases where leaders endorse the MFs they care more by sacrificing the MFs they care less. For example, an eastern leader who advocates purity more than caring may treat candidates who used to be criminals harshly in recruitment. The leader may think he/she is protecting his company, or advocating justice, but his/her employees from a culture valuing caring more than purity may think the leader is being cruel to those who made mistakes. However, the difference might still not be significant enough to be detected in experimental settings. As stated by Graham et al. (2011), the broad eastern-western cultural difference in MF is far less significant than the more precise in-group cultural difference, such as political difference and gender difference.

2.2 When leaders and followers are from different political groups

Political psychologists divide people with different ideologies into two general categories, conservatives and liberals. These two groups share different views on equality, social changes (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a, 2003b), and authority (Sowell, 2002). Liberals are open to the changings of the society, think that everyone is born equal, and believe that people are moral in nature and would develop better without the restrictions of the authority. Contrarily, conservatives think that not everyone is born unequal, so the unequal distribution of resources can be fair. Furthermore, they endorse tradition more than reformation, and believe that people are evil in nature and requires the regulation of the authority.

The author posits that followers who share different political attitudes with their leaders tend to perceive their leaders EL inaccurately, since people with different political views are

typically distinct in their moral perception. Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) discovered that liberals and conservatives endorse the five MFs differently. Liberals only concern about the care/harm and the fairness/cheating foundations, whereas conservatives endorse all five MFs. Graham et al. (2009) asked participants to rate their political standings and their perceived relevance of some questions to morality. The questions represent different moral foundations. Example questions are “Whether or not someone was harmed” (care/harm), “Whether or not some people were treated differently than others” (fairness/cheating), “Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty” (loyalty/betrayal), “Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency” (purity/degradation), and “Whether or not someone failed to fulfill the duties of his or her role” (authority/subversion). The results showed that liberal participants cared about binding foundations (loyalty/betrayal, purity/degradation, and authority/subversion) significantly less than individualizing foundations (care/harm and fairness/cheating), whereas conservative participants concerned about binding foundations and individualizing foundations more similarly. Moreover, the more conservative, the more the person equally endorses the five foundations.

Different situations can cause different perception errors. The author predicts that error 1 typically happens when the leader is conservative, and his/her followers are liberal. Error 1 refers to situations where followers judge behaviors perceived as moral by their leader as morally irrelevant. As Graham et al. (2009) discovered, liberal followers may not care about binding foundations as much as conservative leaders do. Therefore, if conservative leaders attempt to establish his/her moral image by endorsing virtues based on binding foundations (loyalty, purity, and authority), his/her followers may consider his/her attempt as morally irrelevant. For instance, if a leader seeks to establish EL by demonstrating his/her respect to his/her own superordinate

and demonstrate authority in front of his/her liberal followers, his/her behavior may not be considered as moral by his/her followers but even considered as immoral.

The author predicts that error 2 typically happens when the leader is liberal, and his/her followers are conservative. Error 2 refers to situations where followers judge non-moral behaviors in their leader's eyes as immoral. Since conservatives care about more dimensions of morality than liberals do, there can be many situations where conservative followers judge liberal leaders harshly when liberal leaders do not realize that they did anything wrong. For example, liberal leaders might have tattoos that conservative followers averse and hence can be judged as immoral by the conservative followers.

Moreover, though there is not enough supporting literature, the author thinks that even if both liberals and conservatives endorse the care/harm and fairness/cheating foundation to a similar extent, they might understand the same MF differently. For example, liberals may be sensitive to the harm to everyone, including criminals and homosexuals, whereas the harm to criminals and homosexuals might not be perceived as immoral by conservatives. Conservatives may think fairness is equity, which argues that everyone receives rewards according to their contribution, whereas the fairness liberals may think fairness is equality, which argues that everyone should be treated equally no matter what. Liberals and conservatives' different understandings of the same foundation can be another source of perception error.

Moreover, political difference itself can lead to error 1 as well. Liberals and conservatives disagree with each other on multiple aspects other than MFs. Difference in political attitudes can cause extreme aversion between people with different ideologies (Graham, Nosek, & Haidt, 2012). The author proposes that such aversion can cause followers to neglect leaders' ethical behavior and hence causes error 1 in followers' perception of EL.

2.3 Gender difference in MF

There is also a gender difference in the endorsement of MFs. Graham et al. (2011) found that women endorse purity, fairness, and harm foundations more than men, whereas men endorse loyalty and authority more than women. The way by which gender difference causes perception errors is similar to the ways discussed in previous sections. Error 1 may happen when leaders endorse MFs that they value but are not valued as much by their followers of opposite gender. Error 2 may happen when leaders violate MFs that they care little but are highly endorsed by their followers.

3. Discussion and future direction

In this review, the author summarized the implication of MFT to followers' perception of EL. MFT identifies the roots of individuals' moral perception and can guide the study of EL by denoting the behaviors leaders might engage in to establish EL, the basis of followers' perception of EL, and the situations where followers fail recognizing leaders' ethical behavior or misjudge leaders' behaviors as immoral. Based on MFT, the author suggests that generally, a leader who wants to form EL may practice care to employees, demonstrate fairness in decision making process and reward allocation, exhibit loyalty to the organization and the employees, deal with the relationship with subordinates and superordinates properly, and avoid corruption and scandals. Followers' perception of EL should also be based on whether they have perceived their leader to perform the behaviors mentioned above or not.

Moreover, the author argues that the validity of the hypotheses above is subject to followers and leaders' difference in cultural background, political standings, and gender may cause the errors in followers' perception of EL. Individuals may not endorse all MFs, or endorse the five MFs equally, which causes followers' errors in EL perception. Two perception errors

have been identified in this review. Error 1 happens when leaders have engaged in moral behaviors but the behaviors were not perceived as moral by followers. Error 2 happens when leaders performed behaviors that are non-moral in their own opinions but still judged as immoral by followers.

Apart from the identifying the errors in followers' perception of EL, future studies can compare MFT with other theories to discover the incremental benefits and the boundaries of using MFT to guide the EL study. Moreover, future research can consider identifying more moral foundations.

The liberty/oppression foundation was discovered by Iyer et al. (2012) in an attempt to differentiate libertarians from liberals and conservatives. This foundation refers to libertarians' aversion to being controlled by external forces and libertarians' pursuit of freedom. In an organization, leaders who give freedom to their followers are likely to win the trust of libertarian followers, but such behavior's effect on liberal and conservative followers' effect awaits examination. Future study can also research libertarians, conservatives, and liberals' difference in MFs and how such difference contributes to followers' error in EL perception.

Future studies can also introduce more theories other than MFT and social learning theory into the study of EL, comparing the benefits and boundaries of each theory. An example is the construal level theory (CLT).

CLT emphasizes the effect of construal level (CL) and psychological distance (PD) on individuals' behavior, decision making, and judgment making. The psychological distance of an object/event/behavior refers to the subjective distance of the object/event/behavior from the focal person (Liberman & Trope, 2014; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). The further the object to the person, no matter temporally, spatially, or interpersonally, the further the PD of the object to the

person. The construal level of an object/event refers to the level of the representation of an object/event in a person's mind (Liberman & Trope, 2014; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). One empirical way to distinguish between high and low CLs is abstractness/concreteness. A higher CL of an event is related to those abstract and general features that are shared across all objects/events of similar type, whereas a lower CL is focused on the concrete idiosyncratic features of a single object/event. Another empirical way to distinguish between high and low CLs is goal/method. The higher CL is more related to the goal of the behavior, whereas the lower CL is more related to the specific approaches one uses to achieve the goal. The relationship between PD and CL is bidirectional: PD increase leads to higher CL, and CL increase leads to further PD (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

The author proposes that CL can impact followers' perception of EL in two ways. First, CL can moderate the effect of MF on followers' perception of EL. Second, different CL might trigger different MF.

Since virtues and morality belongs to high CL, they are more likely to be evoked if one is thinking at high CL (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). Therefore, followers' MF may be more activated at high CL than at low CL. Therefore, at high CL, leaders' behaviors endorsing followers' activated MF would contribute to the establishment of EL more efficiently, and leaders' behaviors violating the followers' activated MF would cause more harm to the establishment of EL. However, the effect of CL on moral judgment is unclear. Priming participants to contemplate the goal of the action (high CL) was found to cause utilitarian moral judgment, whereas priming participants to contemplate the method of the action (low CL) was detected to cause deontological moral judgment (Gong & Medin, 2012). This indicates that people's MF may not necessarily be evoked more at high CL and less at low CL. Therefore,

future research can focus on concreting the effect of CL on moral judgment to determine the effect of CL on followers' perception of EL.

Another possible way by which CL influence followers' perception of EL is that different levels of CL may evoke different MF to different extent. Thus, at different CL, followers' focus on different MF might be different. The violation or endorsement of the MF that are evoked to a larger extent would cause larger harm or benefit to the establishment of EL, and the violation or endorsement of the MF that are evoked to a smaller extent would cause less harm or benefit to the establishment of EL.

4. Conflict of interests

None.

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