LINKING ETHICS TO LEADERSHIP: THE ROLE OF LEADER'S MORAL IDENTITY AND MORAL ATTENTIVENESS

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Abstract - The ongoing question in the study of leaders' ethical behavior is when and why leaders act in the service of human welfare. Previous studies placed their focus on the examination of organizational performance, ethical environment, and culture in organizations to delve into the antecedents and outcomes of ethical leadership. Among these studies, the social cognitive perspective provided a means of acknowledging that some individuals are more attentive to moral matters and that their behavior is shaped by their interaction with information. This perspective applied to ethical leadership proposed that leaders influence the ethical conduct of followers via observational learning, imitation, and identification. However, there is still the need to examine the association between ethical leaders' ethical characteristics and ethical leadership, beyond personality and from the perspective of the leaders. In this study, we test a theoretical framework to examine leader's moral identity and moral attentiveness as antecedents of ethical leadership focusing on the point of view of leaders. An online questionnaire was administrated to associations in Spain that integrate leaders working in different economic sectors from financial and marketing areas. Preliminary results from 192 participants are analyzed using descriptive statistic approach to investigate the components of the leader's moral identity, how they face moral dilemmas, how the leader's moral attentiveness is characterized, and how ethical leadership importance is perceived. Results show that Spanish female participants demonstrate higher moral identity and lower moral attentiveness than Spanish male participants and her behavior as leaders fits better with ethical leadership. No important differences appear between the financial leaders and marketing leader related to moral identity, but moral attentiveness scale shows higher values for leaders in the marketing area and these leaders show better fit with the statements in the ethical leadership.

Keywords - Ethical leadership, financial managers, marketing managers, moral attentiveness, moral identity, social cognitive theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

During the last few years, the concept of ethics has come to prominence in the field of research of leadership due to factors mainly: First, many high-profile scandals have revealed unethical behaviors by corporate leaders. Second, ethical leadership – the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005) -has been enhanced because of empirical findings of research has shown that this leadership style is related to important organizational outcomes as improved performance (Bello, 2012; Kuenzi, Mayer, & Greenbaum, 2020; Shin, Sung, Choi, & Kim, 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2011). These points have led both academics and practitioners to focus greater attention on the ethical environment and culture in organizations on to examine the antecedents and outcomes of ethical leadership. If ethical leadership is as important as the research suggests, it seems essential to understand the characteristics that contribute to leader's ethical behavior. Yet relatively few studies have empirically examined the antecedents of ethical leadership. Focusing on the point of view of leaders, this research set out to examine the association between ethical leaders' ethical characteristics (beyond personality) and ethical leadership. In this study, we tested a theoretical model based upon social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) to examine leader's moral identity and moral attentiveness as antecedents of ethical leadership. Based upon data from 192 leaders in Spain from financial and marketing area by an online survey, we examine the components of the leader's moral identity, how they face moral dilemmas, how the leader's moral attentiveness is characterized, and how ethical leadership importance is perceived. Results are discussed focusing on the analysis of possible differences regarding generational, gender, training, or organizational variables.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory has provided the foundation for recent behavioral ethics research (Marquardt, Casper, & Kuenzi, 2020; Martin, Emich, McClean, & Woodruff, 2021; Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014) including research on moral identity, moral attentiveness, and ethical leadership. Therefore, it offers a useful overarching framework for this study and the relationships we propose. Social cognitive theory emphasizes the importance of individual cognition, self-reflection, and self-regulation, as well as how cognition results from the social environment via attention processes and social learning from models.

A. Leader's Moral Identity and Ethical Leadership

Moral identity is defined as a psychological construct built on both, the cognitive-developmental model (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977a) and socio-cognitive approach (A. Bandura, 1997). Social cognitive theory represents moral identity as a component of one's self concept. Moral identity has been described as one kind of self-regulatory mechanism that motivates moral action (Damon & Hart, 1992; Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998). (Aquino & Americus, 2002) proposes that, like other social identities leaders embrace, moral identity can be a basis for social identification that leaders use to construct their self-definitions and it may be associated with certain values, attitudes and behaviors, so moral identity refers to the extent to which leaders believe themselves to be ethical and the degree to which moral traits such as being caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, honest and kid are important and central to their self-definition, including their desire to represent this aspect of themselves to others. (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007) added that moral identity also represents an important link between moral judgment and moral behavior. When facing moral dilemmas, leaders need to select, perceive, interpret, and respond to external stimuli. Because moral identity influences ethical decision-making, leaders with a higher level of moral identity can be expected to be more likely to make ethical decisions and act ethically (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012)

We thus propose that leaders with stronger moral identity will be more likely engage in the normatively appropriate behaviors that are associated with ethical leadership. They will show care and concern for their followers and other stakeholders such as customers or business partners and they will make fair and principled decisions. They will engage in and encourage pro-social behavior and will be more likely to notice, discourage and correct unethical behavior in themselves and in others, all attributes of ethical leadership.

B. Leader's Moral Attentiveness and Ethical Leadership

Scholars have noted that regularly attending to ethical issues is essential to ethical decision making and conduct (Al Halbusi, Ruiz-Palomino, Morales-Sánchez, & Abdel Fattah, 2021; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977b; Miao, Eva, Newman, Nielsen, & Herbert, 2020; Trevino, 1986) because when leaders interpret situations as having ethical content and consider how different options affect the concerned parties, they are more likely to behave ethically. One of the critical factors influencing one's awareness of ethical issues is moral attentiveness, a relatively new construct in the behavioral ethics literature which is defined by (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1028) as "the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences".

Based upon social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), (Reynolds, 2008) proposed that some individuals are cognitively more attentive to ethical issues than others and that individuals' moral attentiveness has a significant effect on how individuals understand and act in their moral worlds. With high moral attentiveness, individuals focus more on morality and use a moral lens to make sense of experience and process incoming stimuli.

(Reynolds, 2008) suggested that an individual's level of moral attentiveness was associated with both increased moral awareness and moral behavior. Thus, leaders who are high on moral attentiveness should be more regularly attentive to the moral dimensions of information they encounter and more likely to reflect on the information with their followers. They are likely to bring this attentiveness and resulting moral awareness and ethical behavior to their leadership role.

III. METHODS

A. Participants and Procedure

In a prelaminar study, we collected a total of 216 online questionaries from financial and marketing leaders working in Spain with a completion rate of 89%, so 192 were completed surveys. The first page of the questionnaire provided us demographic information (such as age, gender, educational level) and work-related information (job rank, experience in management position, salary, etc.). A structured questionnaire was compiled in English and then translated into Spanish. Before the survey, we explained to the participants the purpose and requirement of the research, ensured the confidentiality of research process.

In the leader sample, 32.3% were female and 67.7% were male. 25.53% were between 25 and 40; 41.67% were between 40 and 50; 32.82% were above 45. The majority (97.4%) held a college degree or above and has an average working tenure of 15 years.

B. Measures

Ethical leadership was measured using Brown et al.'s (2005) 10-item 5-point Likert scale. This scale was completed with the version subsequently revised by (Khan & Javed, 2018), where discrepancies were corrected by adding 6 items that allow a better adjustment of the representation of the manager's moral component. Leaders were asked to consider their job in management positions and indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements about the development of their leadership in their organizations. Sample items include, "listen to what

employees have to say"; and "disciplines employees who violate ethical standards". In this study, factor is performed on SPSS to verify the dimensionality of constructs. To examine the internal consistency of the variables, the coefficient of Cronbach's alpha is adopted. If the Cronbach's alpha is greater than 0.7 means it has high reliability, if the Cronbach's alpha is between 0.5 and 0.6 that the internal consistency of the factor is still acceptable and if the Cronbach's alpha is smaller than 0.3 that it has low reliability (Robinson & Shaver, 1973). For this scale, our data showed a score of 0.91 (greater than 0.7) for the Cronbach's alpha in the reliability analysis, 0.9 for the marking leader sample and 0.93 for the sample of financial managers. For the male sample, the Cronbach's alpha is 0.89 and it is 0.92 for female sample.

Moral identity was measured using Aquino and Reed's (2002) 10-item-5-point Likert moral identity scale. In this part of the questionnaire, leader had to evaluate how some traits (caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, hardworking, helpful, honest, and kind) adjust to the performance of their work as a manager. Next to each characteristic, we attached a brief description in accordance with definitions given in (Aquino & Americus, 2002). Cronbach's alpha score is 0.81, 0.69 for the male sample and 0.83 for the female sample, these values are still within or very close to the acceptable range. In reference to the leader's area of work, the value of the Cronbach's alpha is 0.87 for leaders working in marketing area and 0.84 for those working in financial area.

We measured moral attentiveness using (Reynolds, 2008) 12-item, 7-point Likert moral attentiveness scale. It includes both perceptual (7 items) and reflective sub-dimensions (5 items). Sample items were "Many of the decisions that I make have ethical dimensions (perceptual aspect)" and "I think about the morality of my actions almost every day (reflective aspect)". Regarding the gender of the sample, Cronbach's alpha scores are 0.81 and 0.83 for male and female samples and with respect to the area in which the manager develops his/her leadership, Cronbach's alpha scores are 0.79 for marketing leaders and 0.84 por financial managers.

In the interest of parsimony, because we did not theorize different relationships for the two dimensions, and because these two sub-dimensions have been demonstrated to be highly correlated and to have similar relationship patterns with other theoretically discriminant and convergent measures (Reynolds, 2008), we created a general scale of moral attentiveness as others have done (van Gils, Van Quaquebeke, van Knippenberg, van Dijke, & De Cremer, 2015; Whitaker & Godwin, 2012; Zhu, Trevinõ, & Zheng, 2016)

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics are used to describe the basic features of the data in this study. In this preliminary analysis of our data, they provide simple summaries about the sample and the measures in the survey, forming the basis of the subsequent quantitative analysis.

A. Gender and Moral Identity

Table I shows the mean values and standard deviations obtained for the 9 factors of moral identity according to the gender of the participants. We use standard deviation as a figure to measure how the values for an individual item are spread out from the mean in our data set.

In our questionnaire, the question about gender had the option of not being answered by the participants or selecting that they did not identify with the options of "male" or "female", but all the leaders who responded to the survey selected their gender as one of those answers (male or female).

	Female		Male	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Caring	4.5	0.53	4.2	0.85
Compassionate	3.7	0.89	3.5	0.97
Fair	4.5	0.62	4.4	0.77
Friendly	4.1	0.74	3.9	0.81
Generous	4.1	0.69	3.9	0.78
Hardworking	4.8	0.41	4.5	0.70
Helpful	4.2	0.71	3.9	0.84
Honest	4.7	0.45	4.5	0.72
Kind	4.4	0.61	4.2	0.76

Table I. Descriptive statistical analysis: The influence of Gender on Moral Identity

Answers corresponding to the female participants present mean values closer to the maximum value, 5, and smaller standard deviations. This means that the answers of the female participants have less dispersion than those obtained by their male colleagues, who present lower mean values in all the characteristics and a greater dispersion of the responses.

B. Financial vs Marketing Leaders and Moral Identity

Table II shows the mean values and standard deviations obtained for the traits related to moral identity for financial and marketing managers. Here the mean values for financial and marketing managers are very similar, although they are slightly higher for marketing managers. Data related to marketing managers have a higher standard deviation, indicating a greater dispersion in the responses of the leaders in this area. As in the comparative study of gender, the item "Compassionate" has the lowest mean values and the highest standard deviation values, indicating that leaders do not consider this trait as important in the ethical performance of their work regardless of their gender.

	Marketing		Finance	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Caring	4.2	0.91	4.4	0.64
Compassionate	3.6	1	3.5	0.85
Fair	4.3	0.8	4.5	0.69
Friendly	4.2	0.82	3.9	0.76
Generous	4.1	0.78	3.9	0.73
Hardworking	4.5	0.77	4.5	0.5
Helpful	4.1	0.89	3.9	0.75
Honest	4.5	0.77	4.5	0.48
Kind	4.4	0.8	4.2	0.63

Table II. Descriptive statistical analysis: The influence of the field in which leader works on Moral Identity

C. Moral Attentiveness

Table III shows the mean values and standard deviations obtained for Reynold's moral attentiveness scale according to the gender and the working area of the participants.

	Female	Male	Marketing	Finance
	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)
On a typical day, I face several ethical dilemmas.	3.98 (1.53)	4.01 (1.50)	3.99 (1.59)	4.05 (1.40)
I often must choose between doing what's right and doing something that's wrong.	3.45 (1.64)	3.59 (1.60)	3.6 (1.59)	3.50 (1.61)
I regularly face decisions that have significant ethical implications.	3.79 (1.64)	3.87 (1.60)	3.79 (1.67)	3.84 (1.55)
My life has been filled with one moral predicament after another.	3.39 (1.47)	3.44 (1.45)	3.44 (1.52)	3.35 (1.38)
Many of the decisions that I make have ethical dimensions to them.	4.34 (1.34)	4.25 (1.45)	4.13 (1.54)	4.38 (1.31)
I regularly think about the ethical implications of my decisions.	4.84 (1.55)	4.94 (1.36)	4.93 (1.45)	4.85 (1.45)
I think about the morality of my actions almost every day.	4.46 (1.61)	4.42 (1.47)	4.64 (1.49)	4.27 (1.52)

I frequently encounter ethical situations.	4.29 (1.45)	4.28 (1.34)	4.35 (1.33)	4.22 (1.42)
I often find myself pondering about ethical issues.	4.32 (1.48)	4.19 (1.34)	4.41 (1.27)	4.10 (1.49)
I often reflect on the moral aspects of my decisions.	4.42 (1.5)	4.39 (1.38)	4.49 (1.36)	4.35 (1.47)
I like to think about ethics	5.23 (1.24)	5.08 (1.25)	5.36 (1.44)	5.01 (1.32)

Table III. Descriptive statistical analysis: The influence of gender or working area on Moral Attentiveness

Answers corresponding to the questions: "I regularly think about the ethical implications of my decisions" and "I like to think about ethics" have the highest score for participants of both genders with a low standard deviation. The same two questions receive the highest score by managers from both sectors, marketing, and finance. According to the results, leaders of both genders and from both work environments (marketing and finance) are very aware of ethics in the development of their work as a leader and in the decision-making process in their organizations.

D. Ethical Leadership in the Marketing and Finance Environment according to Gender

Table IV shows the mean values and standard deviations obtained for Brown's Ethical Leadership scale according to the gender of the leaders in the marketing and finance area.

	Female	Male	Marketing	Finance
	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)
Conduct your personal life in an ethical manner.	6.27 (0.81)	6.08 (0.8)	6.11 (0.88)	6.16 (0.74)
Define success not just by results but also by the way that they are obtained.	6.49 (0.73)	6.16 (0.91)	6.24 (0.99)	6.28 (0.76)
Listen to what your employees have to say.	6.40 (0.61)	6.27 (0.71)	6.31 (0.68)	6.31 (0.66)
Discipline employees who violate ethical standards.	5.44 (1.59)	5.70 (1.20)	5.46 (1.52)	5.66 (1.20)
Make fair and balanced decisions.	6.02 (0.85)	5.95 (0.76)	5.86 (0.88)	6.04 (0.72)
Can be trusted.	6.44 (0.69)	6.25 (0.69)	6.40 (0.68)	6.24 (0.70)
Discuss business ethics or values with your employees.	5.48 (1.19)	5.27 (1.22)	5.20 (1.16)	5.21 (1.21)
Set an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics.	5.58 (1.02)	5.67 (0.95)	5.63 (1.07)	5.63 (0.93)
Have the best interests of your employees in mind.	6.08 (0.81)	5.95 (0.86)	6.10 (0.80)	5.90 (0.9)
When making decisions, ask "what is the right thing to do?"	6.24 (0.98)	6.04 (0.9)	6.08 (0.93)	6.14 (0.93)

Table IV. Descriptive statistical analysis: The influence of gender or working area on Ethical Leadership

Results show that for the female gender, the question with the highest score corresponds to "Define success not just by results but also by the way that they are obtained" with a reduced dispersion of the results for that gender. At the same time, for the male gender, the question "Listen to what your employees have to say" is the one that receives the highest rating with a low standard deviation. This issue is also highly valued by managers in both areas, finance, and marketing. On the other hand, the question of how managers discuss business ethics and values with their employees receives a low rating from managers of both genders and from both work environments.
Comparing the results of Table III and IV, managers give higher ratings to the constructs of ethical leadership compared to those of Moral Attentiveness, both being 7-point Likert scale.

V. LIMITATIONS

Business ethics research has been widely known as an inherently sensitive area of inquiry and this increases the potential for the probable contamination of data obtained from this research due to social desirability response and non- response biases that commonly threaten the validity of social research. Our investigation is in a preliminary state of analysis. We are currently performing the Confirmatory Factor Analysis once the data collection and descriptive statistical analysis is completed. Our questionnaires have been online distributed in different companies, associations, professionals in the financial and marketing environment and organizations in Spain at different moments in time. In many cases we have had to carry out several reminders to get managers to answer the survey and some associations we contacted refused to distribute surveys on ethical or moral issues among their members.

Although this research is adopted with questionnaire investigation with concise question contents, we worked with two experts in the university context of business ethics to help us with the translation and explanation of the survey constructs, yet, we still cannot realize whether the respondents can substantially understand the original contextual meaning of our questionnaire to reflect the interviewed results with best trueness.

VII. RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In this study, we have carried out a comparative statistical analysis of two areas of work in companies: marketing and finance and through the gender variable. Other studies may be carried out in the future by adding other demographic factors such as age, allowing a comparative analysis to be made through the different generations or labor factors such as years of experience in managerial positions or the hierarchical level of the leader in the company.

A deeper analysis of the collected data will be performed using the Structural Equations modeling methodology to determine if the Moral identity and Moral attentiveness of the leader can be considered antecedents of Ethical Leadership.

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