

A Conceptual Analysis of Cognitive Moral Development and Altruistic Behavior in the Work place

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Abstract

This article provides a novel theoretical analysis of altruistic behavior in the context of cognitive moral development. Specifically, we apply Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory and examine the relationship between an individual's moral developmental level and the individual's altruistic behavior. Our theoretical analysis suggests that individuals at the pre-conventional level of moral development will demonstrate no or low levels of altruistic behavior and individuals at the post-conventional level of moral development will demonstrate high levels of altruistic behavior. Given that workplace morality has become one of the important topics in organizational studies, this article provides important implications for theory and managerial practice.

Keywords: Altruistic behavior, cognitive moral development, pre-conventional moral development, post-conventional moral development.

Introduction

Since its emergence in the literature, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) has received much attention because OCB enhances determine group and organizational effectiveness (Lee& Allen, 2002; Ryan, 2001). According to Organ, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie (2006), OCB refers to "individual behavior that is discretionary not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and in the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of an organization" (p. 3). Given the nature of OCB, it has often been classified into five distinct forms including altruism, courtesy, sportsmanship, conscientiousness, and civic virtue (Organ, 1998). Among these five forms of OCB, altruism is the most frequently studied because it has direct implications for the bottom line of business, and is a strong predictor of organizational performance (Batson, Ahmad, & Stocks, 2011; Feather&Rauter,2004). Altruism holds that being moral consists in self-sacrificially serving others. Taking into account the crucial role that altruism plays, prior research has sought to identify antecedents of altruistic behavior.

Some antecedents of altruistic behavior include emotional regulation (e.g., Glomb, Bhawe, Miner, & Wall, 2011), leader-member relations (e.g., Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008), leadership characteristics (e.g., Choi, 2009), role perceptions (e.g., McAllister, Morrison, Kamdar, & Turban, 2007), etc.

The previous empirical evidence has shown that altruism affects an individual's willingness to exhibit OCB (Tepper & Taylor, 2003). However; the literature provides limited discussion on the relationship between an individual's moral development and altruistic behavior. In spite of what we know about altruism, we still have limited knowledge about how an individual's moral developmental stage affects the degree of altruistic behavior that he or she exhibits. Specifically, because an individual's morality typically imposes considerable amount of demands on the individual's behavior towards others, the inclusion of moral developmental stages in the study of altruistic behavior may provide us with a better understanding altruism. To address this research need, this article draws upon Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory and examines how an individual's moral developmental stage influences his or her altruistic behavior. In particular, our analysis focuses on two extreme levels of moral development including pre-conventional and post-conventional levels, and their effect on altruistic behavior. Figure 1 shows the proposed theoretical model.

Consequently, this article makes two important contributions. First, this study provides organizations and managers with an understanding of individuals' morality in the context of discretionary behavior. Given that altruism involves cooperating without concerning for own benefits and self-sacrificing, this article highlights the importance of morality in altruism. In addition, this article is one of the very few studies that link altruistic behavior with moral development and therefore it provides several important implications for theory and managerial recommendations that may be used by organizations and management to enhance organizational performance.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In the second section, the content is a brief review on the altruism research. Next, we develop a theoretical framework and provide arguments on how moral developmental stage affects the altruistic behavior exhibited by an individual. As the theoretical arguments are presented, propositions for future empirical research are offered. In the fourth section, we discuss the implications for theory and managerial practice as well as the limitations of this article and future research directions. The final section concludes with a brief summary.

Literature Review

Research on Altruistic Behavior

Because of the potential benefits that it creates, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) has consistently received much attention from scholars and practitioners. Although prior OCB research has commonly analyzed the five forms of OCB (i.e., altruism, courtesy, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, and civic virtue), altruism is the most frequently studied form in the OCB literature because of its strong impact on organizational functioning (Taehee, Park, & Chang, 2011).

Altruism is usually interpreted as an individual's willingness of an employee to help a coworker without concerning for own interests (Organ, 1988). Additionally, altruism involves going above and beyond job requirements to help others with whom an individual comes into contact (Organ et al., 2006). Thus, altruistic behavior may include helping a colleague who has been absent from work, helping others who have heavy workloads, being mindful of how one's own behavior affects others' jobs, and providing help and support to new employees represent clear indications of an employee's interest for its work environment (Underwood, Froming, & Moore, 1977). Given the nature of altruism, it is argued that altruism makes the work system more efficiently because slack time may be allocated to urgent tasks (Yen & Neihoff, 2004).

As mentioned earlier, altruistic behavior plays an important role in determining organizational performance, previous research has paid much attention to factors affecting an individual's willingness to engage in altruistic behavior. For instance, Ryan (2001) found that an employee's level of moral reasoning was a significant predictor of his or her altruistic behavior. Van Dyne et al. (2008) discovered that part-time work status negatively affected employees' willingness to exhibit altruistic behavior. Drawing upon the social exchange theory that an employee's altruistic behavior was determined by how much OCB the employee has received from coworkers (Deckop, Cirka, & Andersson, 2003; Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996), Noblet, McWilliams, Teo, and Rodwell (2006) determined that job control and social support were significant predictors of altruistic behavior. Tang, Sutarso, Davis, Dolinski, Ibrahim, and Wagner (2008) established that both intrinsic motives (e.g., concern for people) and extrinsic motives (e.g., impression management) contributed significantly to altruistic behavior. Glomb et al. (2011) revealed that negative emotional resulted in altruism, which in turn created positive moods. In a more recent study conducted by Ueda (2012), it was found that cognitive job involvement negatively affected altruistic behavior.

When attempting to understand altruism, scholars have indicated that cognitive moral could affect workplace behaviors (e.g., Ryan, 2001). Therefore, in the following section, we briefly discuss Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory.

Theoretical Framework and Research Propositions

Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory (1971, 1976), which is the leading theory in the field of moral development, focuses on how an individual behavior transitions through multiple moral levels and how those transitions influence and enhance organizational operation and the morality of organization members.

More specifically, individual's moral maturity progresses through three levels including pre-conventional, convention, and post-convention (Kohlberg, 1976). At each of these levels, individuals use different moral reasoning to determine their behaviors. At the pre-conventional level, individuals are concerned about themselves and their own interests. This particular moral reasoning reinforces individuals' self-serving behaviors such as obtaining tangible and/or intangible benefits. As individuals continue to grow morally, they enter the conventional level.

At the conventional level, individuals justify their behaviors based upon social relativism. Specifically, individuals' behaviors are reinforced by the need for building and maintaining long-term social relationships, and being trustworthy. This type of moral reasoning allows individuals to pay attention to social expectations from the larger social system (Kohlberg, 1984). At the highest level of moral development, individuals utilize internalized moral principles and determine their choice of moral actions. Specifically, individuals start to identify individual rights and ensure their behaviors promote these rights in the larger social system (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1984a). Moreover, individuals' moral principles at the post-conventional level are universal and therefore do not change across different social systems.

Although Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory has been considered biased (e.g., gender biased) (Gilligan, 1982), multiple scholars have advocated Kohlberg's theory as an important theory for explaining human behaviors (e.g., Goolsby & Hunt, 1992; Lampe & Finn, 1992; Ponemon, 1990; Trevino, 1986). In the following sections, we provide our theoretical arguments on how Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory can be used to explain altruistic behavior in organizations.

Pre-Conventional Level and Altruistic Behavior

At the pre-conventional level, people in organizations determine what is right by obeying authority. In other words, doing the right thing is obeying authority and avoiding punishment (Kohlberg, 1984). Meanwhile, altruism is usually viewed as an individual's willingness to help coworkers and therefore is considered the selflessness of an employee's behavior towards organizational members. This particular nature of altruism, thus, cannot be reinforced by the obedience of authority and/or the avoidance of punishment (Miller, 2005). More specifically, because an individual's behavior at the pre-conventional level focuses on the pursuit of personal benefits, demonstrating altruistic behavior does not create personal gain given that altruism is a non-rewarded discretionary behavior (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1984b). Additionally, it has been argued that self-serving attitudes and behaviors at the pre-conventional level might result in negative work outcomes such as low group cohesiveness, low performance, and low intention to commit to and stay in the group of organizations (Goolsby & Hunt, 1992; Zahavi, 1995). Based upon the nature of moral reasoning at the pre-conventional level, we expect that individuals at the pre-conventional level of moral development will demonstrate no or low levels of altruistic behavior. This leads to our first proposition:

Proposition 1: Individuals at the pre-conventional level of moral development will demonstrate no or low levels of altruistic behavior.

Post-Conventional Level and Altruistic Behavior

At the post-conventional level, individuals look beyond self-interest and social expectations, and use universal principles to promote individual rights and justice. Because post-conventional reasoning represents a concern for the whole social system, individuals engage in behaviors that promote welfare and respect human rights (Kohlberg, 1984). Meanwhile, altruism has been often considered another-oriented behavior that focuses on benefiting others' well-being (Batson et al., 2011). More specifically, altruism is exhibited when an individual helps others who have heavy workloads, helps a colleague who has been absent from work, is mindful of how one's own behavior affects others' jobs, and provides help and support to new employees. From this perspective, it can be argued that altruistic behavior represents an individual's concern for establishing a work environment where well-being, justice, and respect for others are present. Moreover, it is suggested that individuals at the post-conventional level emphasize cohesion and cooperation, and want to be perceived as trustworthy, honest, and cooperative (Goolsby & Hunt, 1992). Given the moral orientation of individuals at the post-conventional level, we expect that individuals at the post-conventional level of moral development will demonstrate high levels of altruistic behavior. This supports our second proposition:

Proposition 2: Individuals at the post-conventional level of moral development will demonstrate high levels of altruistic behavior.

Discussion

In this article, we examine the relationship between an individual's cognitive moral developmental stages, focusing on the two levels of moral development (pre-conventional and principled) and its effect the individual's altruistic behavior. Thus, the primary purpose of this article is to provide organizations and managers with an understanding of individuals' altruistic behaviors in the context of their moral development. This article provides several important implications for theory and organizational practice. In the following sections, we present the implications for theory and practice.

Implications for Theory

We believe that the inclusion of moral development in the analysis of altruism extends the literature in two major ways. First, this article is one of the few studies that investigate altruism in organizations through the lens of individual moral development and therefore provides additional insight into the understanding of antecedents of altruistic behavior in the workplace. In addition, this article provides an important contribution to the moral behavior literature by linking cognitive moral development with discretionary behavior at work. By doing so, this article offers a different perspective that may guide future theoretical and empirical research that examines the relationship between moral development and workplace behavior.

Implications for Practice

This article emphasizes the importance of moral development in the context of altruism and thus provides several managerial implications. First, understanding individual moral developmental stage may provide insight into structuring a work environment where altruistic behavior is encouraged, which in turn may enhance organizational effectiveness (Goolsby & Hunt, 1992). For instance, we have claimed that individuals at the post-conventional stage will demonstrate high levels of altruistic behavior. Thus, organizations and managers should facilitate the development of post-conventional individual morality. This can be done by, for example, employing moral relationship trainings that focus on fostering positive relationships and organizational well-being. Additionally, organizations and managers can facilitate the development moral reasoning by offering workshops where moral dilemmas are presented and the organizational members, as a whole social system, are charged with exploring possible moral solutions.

We have suggested that individuals at the pre-conventional moral developmental stage will demonstrate no or low levels of altruistic behavior. Organizations and managers, therefore, should minimize or eliminate the negative effect of pre-conventional level work values on discretionary behavior. This can be done by aligning personal moral values with the organization's mission and objective thereby creating opportunities for fulfilling the individual's personal moral and emotional needs and encouraging altruistic behavior. Additionally, organizations and managers should pay attention to establishing organizational climates where altruistic behavior is encouraged. For instance, organizations and managers can utilize community-building activities to enhance work relationships, which in turn may change organizational members' moral focus from self-interest to other-interest.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

When examining individual differences, previous research has suggested that personality could partly determine individuals' behavior. For instance, it has been suggested that individuals with high levels agreeableness are characterized as cooperative, amicable, helpful, honest, decent, and trustworthy (Richards & Schat, 2011). From this standpoint, one can expect that personality traits could play a crucial role in determining an individual's moral reasoning. Although the primary objective of this article is to introduce a new perspective to understand altruistic behavior, future research that includes the personality traits is needed in order to strengthen our proposed theoretical model.

A second limitation of this article comes from Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory itself. More specifically, because Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory used males as respondents, it has been criticized for being gender biased. Given that Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory is used as the theoretical base to explain individual altruistic behavior, the propositions offered by this article might be different in the context of female cognitive moral development.

Thus, future empirical and theoretical research may be needed to determine whether gender affects the relationship between moral developmental stage and altruistic behavior.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to explore altruistic behavior exhibited by individuals in the context of moral development as this emphasis has received little attention. By analyzing the influence of moral development on altruistic behavior, this article provides the propositions that may guide future theoretical and empirical research. In addition, we offer managers and organizations suggestions and recommendations on establishing a work environment where individual altruistic behaviors are encouraged.

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Figure 1: Proposed Theoretical Model

