

AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERS IN THE NONPROFIT SECTOR: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF LAWRENCE KOHLBERG'S COGNITIVE-DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to determine the relationship between the leadership preferences of research participants and the independent variables. The study also examined the extent to which the leadership preferences of research participants could be predicted by their level of educational achievement, income level and gender. The results demonstrate that the mean responses of participants could not be predicted by their differences in income, educational level or gender. Our findings in this study were broadly in line with our prior expectations manifested in the null hypotheses that there would be weak associations between the variables.

Keywords: post-conventional reasoning, African-American nonprofit leaders, cognitive-developmental psychology.

Introduction

Given the harsh economic realities of the recent recession for-profit organizations; both large and small, organizations have become more concerned with the economic and social returns to their investments in leadership development activities (Altman & Kelly-Radford, 2004). The question at stake for concerned stakeholders has been the structuring of leadership capacities that are capable of effectively aligning corporate objectives and operational resources with the new challenges and organizational realities. This particular response and strategic orientation of business organizations comes in the wake of constant realignments and fierce market competition in domestic and international business environments.

Given their particular nature, available resources, and strategic imperatives, non-profit organizations approach these questions differently. This observation has been made by some authors, including Phipps and Burbach (2010). The situation is also different for African-American non-profit organizations that strive to cope with even limited resources and difficult choices in times of severe and periodic economic stress (Reinelt & Meehan, 2004, p. 14).

For example, the relative socio-economic condition of African-American households worsened considerably during the Great Economic recession that began with the housing and financial crises of late 2007 (Patterson, 2010). In fact, by May of 2010, the unemployment rate among African-Americans stood at 15.3 percent, when the overall national rate was at 9.7 percent (p. 18). The situation for black men was almost as desperate as during the nadir of the Great Depression of the 1930s; more than one in six were unemployed, compared to the national average of 9.8 percent (p. 18). In addition, 38 percent of black teenagers out of school and seeking full time employment were unemployed (p. 18).

Thus, the current study examined how African-American leaders of non-profit organizations are managing and steering their organizations through the current fiscal and economic challenges on the basis of their leadership preferences. Hence, we aimed to focus our analyses on how Lawrence Kohlberg's post-conventional moral reasoning impinges upon the leadership preferences of African-American leaders of non-profit organizations (Heilbrun & Georges, 1990).

Thus, leadership preferences of research participants are correlated with other variables to examine associations and predictive effects. In light of the aforementioned concerns, the essential research question for the current study was aimed at investigating whether other factors affected the leadership preferences of African-American leaders operating in the non-profit sector. Our analyses and hypotheses examined whether the independent variables have significant relationship to post-conventional thinking; under the broader rubric of Kohlbergian and Neo-Kohlbergian psychological models (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau & Thoma, 1999).

Thus, to address the research question and to delimit our search for explanation, findings, and relevant patterns, two null hypotheses were formulated. The hypotheses so constructed were subject to testing on the basis of relevant empirical data collected from members of the sampled population (N=32). Thus, the null hypotheses for the study were formulated as follows:

H₀₁: The educational levels of research participants are not related to their adoption of postconventional reasoning or their leadership preferences; such as openness to new ideas and organizational change; even if such actions are contrary to popular opinion.

H₀₂: Differences in income levels of participants are not related to their embrace of subordinates and others on the basis of empathy, justice and mutual reciprocity, regardless of consequences.

Subsequent sections of this paper focused on definition of the research problem. The sections also discussed the academic literature, which informed the theoretical framework of this study. Next, the research design and empirical findings of the study were discussed in light of extant literature on Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory. Finally, recommendations and policy implications of the study and their importance to the body of literature reviewed in this paper are also presented.

Definition of the Problem

This study sought to apply a survey research approach (Creswell, 2003) to investigate leadership preferences among African American leaders of non-profit organizations that are formed on the basis of post-conventional moral thinking. We argue that there is a gap in the extant literature on the theory of moral development in terms of how leadership preferences formed on the basis of post-conventional thinking could also be influenced by other factors outside of formal education (Nather, 2013). Hence, it is suggested that the current study aimed to fill in some of this void by examining the relationship between leadership preferences among African-American leaders and a host of independent variables.

The study was interested in explaining the various dimensions and extent to which variables so specified are correlated. Both linear and multiple regression models were also used, after satisfying its most robust assumptions, to examine the extent to which the values of the dependent variables can be predicted by the independent variables of the study. This study was further predicated upon the assumption that a credible account of the characteristics of the good society and prospects for moral improvement among leaders can be gleaned from the post-conventional stage of Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory (Heibrun & Georges, 1990; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau & Thoma, 1999; Mitten, 2007).

Literature Review

Like most literature reviews in a study of this nature, the review of relevant literature aimed to establish, as Hart (1998) has suggested, an understanding of the structure of the subject and to discover important variables relevant to the topic. In addition, a review of this nature that sets the broader theoretical framework for discussion also aimed to identify the main methodologies and research techniques used in existing studies (p. 27). In this review a distinction was made between what has been done and what needs to be done to give rise to greater methodological and theoretical clarity in terms of identifying the relationships among ideas and practices relevant to how some African-American leaders of non-profit organizations make decisions regarding what ought to be.

Thus, the discussion in this section relied on various data sources which include peer-reviewed research articles found in EBSCO. The EBSCO databases used to extract sources for this review included the Academic Search Complete section and the Business Source Premier section. Academic Search Complete is the world's most comprehensive scholarly and multidisciplinary full-text database that includes more than 5,100 peer-reviewed journals. Meanwhile, the Business Source Premier is the most used business research database that includes more than 1,100 peer-reviewed titles.

Lawrence Kohlberg's Cognitive-Developmental Approach

It is true that Kohlberg's theoretical formulations signaled a shift away from classical virtue ethics, after several interludes; including the stage theories of Piaget, the moral philosophy of John Rawls (Narvaez, Bebeau and Thoma, 1999) and other scholars. However, virtue ethics in a way helped to build the theoretical foundations for later ethical and moral theories, including those of moral and cognitive development.

Nather (2013, p. 470) in a recent article noted that Kohlberg's theory of moral development is the most widely cited theory of moral reasoning. Citing (Trevino, 1992), Nather (p.470) also alluded to the fact that Kohlberg's theory "remains the most dominant and cited work in contemporary behavioral science." The next section will show how in place of an approach anchored

upon Aristotle's classical approach, Kohlberg identified stages of moral development. The theoretical shift from a so-called 'bag-of-virtues approach' was made in spite of an admitted oversimplification of Aristotle's conception of virtue, especially with respect to education and moral training (Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1989, p. 129).

Moral Reasoning and Leadership Practices In Organizations

Like Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, at the core of Kohlberg's stage theory of cognitive moral development is an attempt to explain how people reason or think about interacting with their external environment (Epitropaki, Butcher & Milner, 2002). Kohlberg posited that the moral capacity of agents incorporated problem-solving strategies learned at earlier stages (p. 305). As people age and become educated, they progress through these reasoning stages at different rates and to varying degrees (p. 305). For example, people with pre-conventional moral reasoning stress obedience, "strive to escape from punishment and are generally self-interested" (p. 305).

In Kohlberg's scheme, this is a stage that is very much akin to Piaget's moral thought. Next, there is conventional morality, at which stage agents use rules and laws as instrumental tools to guide their behavior. In the conventional stage of moral reasoning (stages 3 and 4) people emphasize interpersonal relationships and believe in maintaining the social order such as obeying laws, respecting authority and performing one's duties. Kohlberg claimed that moral judgments are viewed as objective by their makers, independently of their personality and interest (Langford, 1995). Moral reasoning is also regarded as reasoning about moral rules that are perceived as first order norms:

The rules that say we should not steal, cheat, or lie are given as typical examples of moral rules having this objective and universal quality. Moral reasoning is above all reasoning about such rules, which in practice Kohlberg, like Piaget restricts to first order norms (p. 70).

According to Heilbrun and Georges (1990, p. 184) Kohlberg's theory claims that what is morally right depends on six stages. The post-conventional level encapsulates stages 5 and 6 respectively. Stage 6 involves the willingness to follow self-chosen principles despite violation of laws. Thus, post-conventionalists use universal principles of reasoning confronting life's challenges (Epitropaki, Butcher & Milner, 2002, p. 305). Heilbrun and Georges (1990) described the transition to post-conventionality and some of its distinguishing characteristics. Kohlberg's approach was later interpreted by Rest (p. 305) as a sequential process ranging from more simpler to more complex cognitive structures focusing on greater degrees of voluntary cooperation implicit in each stage.

This theory is relevant to how social roles and moral reasoning impinge upon leadership practices in organizations because the moral dilemmas on which the theory is based focused on issues of life, property, authority and affectional roles (Harkness, Edwards & Super, 1981). Thus, Vitton and Wasonga (2009, p. 100) suggest that "post-conventional thinking stresses individual rights, democratic processes, and principles by which a society achieves justice, knowing that majority is not always right." Heilbrun and Georges (1990, p. 184) described what is 'morally right' at the post-conventional stage as follows:

Post-Conventional Reasoning

Stage 5: (social construct or utility and individual right)... awareness of the relativity of group values but respect for certain nonrelative values regardless of majority opinion.

Stage 6: (universal ethical principles)...willingness to follow self-chosen principles despite violation of laws.

There have been several criticisms stemming from the fact that the stages were derived from interviews with White male Americans and therefore correctly deemed as Ethnocentric (p. 595). The similarities between all cultures consist in the fact that all cultures distinguished between impulse and desire, on the one hand, and justified and right behavior on the other (p. 595). This notion tends to justify the universal claims of the theory. However, Carol Gilligan (1993) raises strong objections to the universality of Kohlberg's conception of maturity as embodied in post-conventional morality.

These objections are raised on grounds that the theory ignores women's modes of thinking that may be contextual or narrative rather than formal and abstract (p. 19). Gilligan (p. 19) notes that "when one begins with the study of women and derives developmental constructs from their lives, the outline of moral conception different from Freud, Piaget, or Kohlberg begins to emerge and inform a different conception of development." Summarizing the criticism of Kohlberg, Vitton and Wasonga (1999) have noted that

Other notable criticisms came from Gilligan, who pointed out that Kohlberg focused only on the first of Strike's characteristics of moral dilemmas (justice, fairness, impartiality). She also argued that women were consistently relegated to lower levels of moral judgment based on Kohlberg's flawed and gender-based assessment (p. 96).

Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau and Thoma (1999) sought to redefine post-conventionality by suggesting that nearly all modern philosophers would be classified as postconventional, both conservative and liberal, right-wing and left-wing. Perhaps this could be characterized as a much looser assumption in an attempt to render more tepid interpretations. But what is important to note however, is the claim that post-conventional moral judgment is linked to developmentally advanced structures that appeal to shared ideals for organizing cooperation and community (p. 303). Others argued that Kohlberg's scale is arbitrary and vulnerable to attack (Harkness, Edwards & Super, 1981). Harkness, Edwards and Super (1981, p. 596) suggest that findings from a number of studies in traditional societies found that moral judgment Stages 5 and 6, and Stage 4 as a person's dominant stages were not observed in the data.

Edwards (as cited in Harkness, Edwards & Super, 1981, p. 596) argued that the upper stages correspond to modes of conflict resolution in complex societies that are not likely to be found in all countries. Despite these critical observations, research conducted on social roles and moral reasoning in a rural African community demonstrated a significant relationship between a person's status as moral leader and their responses to moral dilemmas (p. 601). The current study builds on these results by describing what constitutes the right or wrong responses to moral dilemmas and leadership challenges among African-American leaders of non-profit organizations.

One could invoke the stage theory of Kohlberg to provide the psychological and developmental basis for lack of empathy among leaders. Thus, this analysis could be located in conventional moral reasoning as posited by Kohlberg. At the conventional reasoning stage (Stage 4), agents make moral decisions from the perspective of the society as a whole because they are interested in maintaining the stability of the social order (Crain, 1985).

The responses to the moral dilemmas in Kohlberg's research indicate that subjects with conventional moral disposition were interested in respecting authority, obeying laws and performing one's duty so that the social order is sustained (p. 4). The conclusion is manifested in the lower levels as specified above and their corresponding ideal types. Thus, this understanding presupposes that organizational leaders could be more interested in maintaining the economic and political benefits that said leaders accrue from the existing leadership and managerial structure. This hypothetical proposition is distinct from post-conventional morality (Stage 6) when people embrace a conception of the good society regardless of consequences.

The good society hypothesis rests on the protection of individual rights and conflict resolution through democratic processes (p. 7). Stage (6) also defines the principles by which we achieve justice (p. 7). Kohlberg has intimated that people can reach this stage by examining moral situations and dilemmas through the eyes of others in terms of assuming a Rawlsian-type *veil of ignorance* (p. 7). Epitropaki, Butcher and Milner (2002, p. 305) suggested that leaders with more complex moral reasoning are more likely to think in terms of sophisticated conceptualizations of interpersonal situations and are able to be aware of a larger number of behavioral options.

The authors (p. 306) also argued that leaders with complex moral reasoning are likely to "value goals that go beyond immediate self-interest and to foresee the benefits of actions that serve the collective good." Post-conventional morality presupposes that values and principles are more universal in that they have validity and applicability irrespective of the group or other authority holding these principles (Viton & Wasonga, 2009, p. 100). This study sought to explore the relationship between post conventional morality as defined by the leadership preferences of some leaders of African American non-profit organizations and a host of variables such as educational achievement, income level, gender etc.).

Methods

Participants

The sample included 32 people (N=32). The age of the participants ranged from 27 to 67 years. The ethnic composition of participants included only African Americans as these were the subject of investigation. The survey administrators attended neighborhood festivals at various city parks in Chicago, Illinois during the summer months of 2013. These areas were chosen because they are generally well attended by a myriad of people, including African-American professionals living and working throughout the city.

Process: We collected data on the basis of a convenience sample (Nolan & Heinzen, 2012). The days our team visited the research site (designated park grounds on the Northside of Chicago) to administer the surveys to participants were on Saturdays and/or Sundays between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. Each survey administrator we designated was equipped with the study survey, pen and/or pencil. The survey administrators traversed park grounds seeking random festival attendees to complete the survey. They individually approached festival goers and explained the purpose of the research project.

The question was posed to each participant if they were employed and occupied a leadership position in a nonprofit organization. Only those who acknowledged working for a nonprofit organization were then asked if they would consider completing the survey. If they agreed, they were given the survey, pen or pencil and the protocol was administered. They were instructed that the survey would take between 10 – 20 minutes to complete. Each participant was informed that their identities would remain confidential. They were also informed their participation was entirely voluntary and they could refuse to complete the survey at any time if they chose.

Procedures and Measures

Post-conventional reasoning. The relationship between post-conventional reasoning and the designated independent variables was gauged by a survey questionnaire embodying a five-point Likert scale we developed for purposes of this study. In this study, we adopted the assumptions of post-conventional reasoning as provided in the extent literature as given (Moroney, 2006; Kohlberg, 1976, 1984). As a result, we did not use the Defining Issues Test (DIT), which has been hailed as a technically strong and reliable measure of moral reasoning in the field.

Citing Rest et al. (1999), Nather (2013, p. 473) noted that the DIT is strong with test-related correlations ranging from .70 to .80 and Cronbach alpha ranging from .76 to .80. Davidson and Robbins (1978) observed that there had been over 500 studies that found the DIT to have good psychometric properties. The DIT was developed by neo-Kohlbergians based at the University of Minnesota to counter some of the criticisms of Kohlberg's techniques (Vitton & Wasonga, 2009). Vitton and Wasonga (p. 102) further stated that "unlike Kohlberg's instruments that scored free-responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas in an interview, the Defining Issues Test employs a multiple-choice, recognition task asking the participants to rate and rank a set of items."

Results

The authors expected that the educational achievement of participants would be one of several determinative factors in explaining the relationship between Kohlberg's moral reasoning and the independent variables. Educational achievement was however, not significantly correlated with post-conventional reasoning as defined in the study. Thus, a Pearson correlation was calculated examining the relationship between participants' leadership preferences as represented by question (Q1, mean 4.22, SD=.870) and their educational achievement. A weak correlation that was not significant was found ($r(30) = .776, p > .05$).

A simple linear regression was performed to predict participants' perceptions based on differences in their educational achievement. The results found that the regression equation was not significant ($F(1, 30) = .083, p > .05$), with R^2 of .003. When educational achievement of participants was combined with income, the results also found that the regression equation was not significant ($F(1, 30) = .294, p > .05$), with R^2 of .020. When both income level and gender were included in the model, the results were also not significant ($F(1, 30) = .575, p > .05$, with R^2 of .067. Next, we conducted a One-Way ANOVA procedure to compare the means of the groups to see how they varied on the independent variable (educational level).

Differences between and within the groups were insignificant ($F(4, 27) = .362, p > 0.5$). **Tukey's HSD** was used to determine the nature of the differences between the groups and the results were also insignificant with ratios ranging from .799 to 1. These results provided empirical justification for accepting the first null hypothesis and rejecting the alternative hypothesis that there might be a relationship between participants' educational level and their leadership preferences. A Pearson correlation was calculated to test the second null hypothesis stipulated above.

The results found a weak correlation that was not significant ($r(30) = .210, p > .05$). A One-Way ANOVA procedure showed that differences between and within the groups among those who responded to (Q6, mean=4.25, SD=.916) were insignificant ($F(4, 27) = .674, p > .05$). These findings provided the rationale for accepting the second null hypothesis and rejecting the alternative hypothesis. **Tukey's HSD** tests comparing how participants responded to question (Q6, mean=4.25, SD=.916) at various levels of educational achievement ((high school, some college, masters, and doctorate) showed insignificant results with ratios ranging from .709 to 1.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to determine the relationship between the leadership preferences of research participants and the independent variables. The study also examined the extent to which the leadership preferences of research participants could be predicted by their levels of educational achievement, income, and gender. The results demonstrate that the mean response of participants to both questions (Q1, mean=4.22, SD=.870) and (Q6, mean=4.25, SD=.916) could not be predicted by their differences in income, educational level or gender.

The lack of association effect with regards to educational level and moral reasoning has been recorded in several studies (Munhall, 1980; Roell, 1980; Nather, 2013). Nather (p. 475) introduced the concepts of beliefs, culture and theology in paraphrasing other studies to suggest that subjects might find it necessary to adapt their beliefs regardless of their levels of formal education. These findings tend to reinforce the idea that moral judgments might often result from unconscious and emotional processes rather than what Lombrozo (2009, p. 273) refers to as the 'application of explicit commitments.' This approach further suggests that explicit commitments might be generated post hoc (p. 273) not necessarily predetermined by consequentialist or deontological factors.

This approach coincides with our findings such as the notion that religious orientation or educational status might not necessarily be correlated with the characteristics of one's leadership preference in the Kohlbergian framework; be they pre-conventional, conventional or post-conventional. We urge that further studies be conducted to gauge the effect of other factors such as family size, the geographical location of subjects in the United States and professional tenure in the non-profit sector. We further suggest that other factors to closely examine could also be the relationship between explicit and implicit impulses for moral judgment.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to determine the relationship between the leadership preferences of research participants and the independent variables. The study also examined the extent to which the leadership preferences of research participants could be predicted by their level of educational achievement, income level and gender.

Our findings found weak associations between the leadership preferences as presented on our Likert scale and the independent variables. The results also demonstrate that the mean responses of participants could not be predicted by their differences in income, educational achievement or gender. Our findings in this study were broadly consistent with our prior expectations and research objectives; embodied in the hypotheses that guided our analyses.

We posit that these findings also present policy implications. Policy implications of our study suggest that the goal of educational and income parity in the African-American community may not be sufficient in terms of fostering leadership preferences consistent with post conventional morality and our ideals of the good society. These include for example, ideals such as empathy, justice, and mutual reciprocity.

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