A Magnetic Pull on the Internal Compass: The Moderating Effect of Response to Culture on the Relationship Between Moral Identity and Ethical Sensitivity

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Abstract

Much of current writing on organizational ethics and leadership has argued for the importance of an internal moral compass: integrity around one’s ethics that is not compromised by an environment that would encourage and reward unethical behavior. While a strong internal ethical system has its merits for organizational life, people do not always act based on their internal ethical standards. Theologian Richard Niebuhr suggested that people will act on their ideals to the extent that they expect this behavior to make a difference. Using the five categories from Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, we identified three worldviews which we termed “Response to Culture”: 1) Aligned – no contradiction between the expectations of the larger culture and their own beliefs; 2) Transform – belief that they are capable of changing culture for good; and 3) Paradox – a view of oneself at odds with the surrounding culture. We found that these three responses moderated the relationship between moral identity and ethical sensitivity. Moral identity did influence ethical sensitivity and intent to act. However, people whose values were aligned with culture were less ethically sensitive than the other two perspectives. Additionally people who endorsed a transforming culture perspective were more likely to show concern for others and less likely to make a business decision that could harm others, particularly when moral identity was high. On the other hand people with a paradox perspective were more likely to identify ethical concerns but less likely to act on them, particularly when moral identity was high.

Recommended Citation

Daniels, Denise; Diddams, Margaret; and Van Duzer, Jeff (2011) "A Magnetic Pull on the Internal Compass: The Moderating Effect of Response to Culture on the Relationship Between Moral Identity and Ethical Sensitivity," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*: Vol. 2 , Article 3. Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol2/iss2/3