Examining Ethical Reasoning and Transformational Leadership Style in Nigeria Public Sector

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Abstract
A significant number of studies reported linkages between ethical moral reasoning and transformational leadership (TFL) style, but questioned its moral foundation based on shared values and ethics. Thus, the issue of public leaders’ and subordinates’ degree of moral judgment and TFL behavior as perceived by followers is explored. The Defining Issues Test (DIT-2) and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ X5) were completed by leaders and subordinates severely (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Path analysis of the structural model indicates positive significant statistical relationship between cognitive moral development (CMD) and TFL style ($\beta = 0.120, t = 1.286, p < .10$). Nevertheless, we indicate that the capacity to experience, discover, and anticipate ethical threats encourages the use of post-conventional stage in decision making, and this result adds to our understanding of the relationship between ethical reasoning and leadership style.

Keywords
ethical reasoning, transformational leadership, public sector

Introduction
Against the backdrop of global socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges, public sector leaders need to prepare their organizations for positive ethical reasoning and moral transformations geared toward check-mating ethical dilemma and lapses. The public sector, especially civil service as a concept connotes a permanent body of officials responsible for the execution of programs and policies of government. There are staffs of various parastatals, ministries, or departments under the executive arm of government. The concept ethics means standards of what are right or wrong behaviors, motives and, its consequences; it is equally a set of acceptable values and norms that relates to human conduct regarded as appropriate or inappropriate (Sorkaa, 2003). In the public service, achieving a private gain to the detriment of the citizenry is a good example of unethical conduct. Ethical reasoning is a matter of value judgment on professional and occupational beliefs and morality; they are the normative values underpinning the public sector administration. Thus, these are an ethical value that upholds the fabric of efficiency and service delivery within the sector. Basically, effective and efficient management of resources and accountability is a global phenomenon, especially in a developing economy like Nigeria, which is bedeviled by ethical decline and leadership lapses.

Furthermore, the public sector administration in Nigeria is abysmal, and engulfed in leadership crisis and moral ethical decline. These are attributed to unethical moral reasoning and behavior of the public officials. More often than not, some ethical lapses are the outcome of poor moral judgment, blatant disregard for code of ethics and law, outright corruption, favoritisms, and other evil intentions of public leaders (Kellerman, 2004), and reasons for leader’s failures are as many as the ethical lapses. Thus, unethical conduct, actions, and porous judgment have created and nourished a leadership crisis that has adversely affected the quality of governance in all spheres and levels of the public service. A notable Nigerian writer and a social critic (Achebe, 1983) posited that one major problem of Nigeria is leadership failure and its attendant consequences.

Moreover, absence of good leadership and governance has been identified as the major setback in socio-economic and political development efforts in the Third World countries (Kurtz & Schrank, 2007). Similarly, the inability of

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public sector leadership in Nigeria to live up to expectations has resulted in the erosion of trust and confidence by the citizenry. A better mechanism for restoring trust and confidence of the populace is through ethical reasoning and moral behavior on the part of the leadership which will enhance the ethicality of subordinates in the work situation. Ethical issues and lapses remain one of the most pronounced gray areas of concern among organizational theorists and leadership scholars. Leadership style and its impact on followers have been central to our everyday life from ages.

However, leaders’ “and subordinates’” degree of moral development has attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners for decades. Nowadays, credible organizations encourage post-conventional ethical reasoning and behavior for efficiency and effectiveness. Similarly, the increasing nature and momentum of ethical decline and leadership failures elicits academic curiosity. Transformational leadership (TFL) style and transactional leadership style focus on employee relationship with leaders, which constitutes complex methodological and theoretical challenges to scholars. Moreover, the impact of individual value orientation remains under explored, while leadership plays crucial role toward blending man and materials for effective organizational outcome.

In the contemporary world of today, most especially the Nigerian public sector, leadership failure and crisis are usually attributed to lack of ethical practices and behavior among the leaders. Equally significant is that most of the values usually linked to ethics in the public sector are always examined independently of the broader issue of leadership (Seifert & Yukl, 2010); in line with this, it is believed that ethic and leadership will be an illusion, if both concepts are not blended. Despite the important role both play in organizations, only few researches have been documented in the Nigerian context at this time, and in particular no study examined the influence of personal, individual value orientation on cognitive moral development (CMD) of leaders and followers (Achebe, 1983). However, researchers on ethics point out that individuals frequently rationalize or disagree over the most moral action to an ethical dilemma, as an action is morally right or wrong depends on the norms of the society.

TFL

Literature evidenced that high ethical standards are the hallmarks of TFL (Bass, 1998; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). TFL vision and values are based on shared ideology. The impact of transformational leadership in the public sector is being contested as scholars maintain that the organizational structure and size of the public sector inhibits or even out rightly makes transformational leadership unethical venture (Seifert & Yukl, 2010), hence the rational for a moderating factor sometimes to cushion negative impediments. Although attention has been focused on TFL due largely to its positive effects, very little has been done to establish its processes. Scholars have therefore made calls for more study to examine the mechanism of TFL style (Judge & Piccolo, 2006). Previous studies supports that the features of the leader, the followers, and situations enhances the chances for a leader to be transformational and to exhibit such behavior (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2009; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the influence of CMD on TFL style and subordinates’ ethicality in the Nigerian public sector.

CMD and TFL Style

The TFL style sometimes referred to as charismatic or visionary leadership exhibits higher level of moral maturity (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), and it uplifts the moral behavioral standards of followers (Burns, 1978). True transformational leaders are known to be optimistic, committed, risk takers, strong willed in character, and possess a great inner sense of direction and judgment (House & Aditya, 1997; Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998), equally, empirical research related TFL to the higher moral development (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Transformational leaders are visionaries who empower, develop, support, create innovations, are charismatic, and lead by example; it has demonstrated a positive relationship on subordinates’ attitudes and organizational outcome and impacts positively on subordinates’ general ethicality.

Post-conventional moral judgment is based on sound reasoning. It is an acceptable solution to an ethical dilemma or between conflicting systems, values, beliefs which require that a leader must make a decision to follow in achieving a set objective. It is important to note that each decision made by a leader is usually based on one criterion or the other; therefore, ethical reasoning and ethical decisions sometimes are based on more than one ethical theory or ethical principle. For example, scholars are of the view that different ethical contents will naturally invoke a different ethical reasoning approach as in cases of coercion and control; this normally will invoke the act utilitarianism ethical reasoning (Fritzsche & Becker, 1984). Ethics could be regarded as a road map which points out the difference between the right and wrong behavior and this equally acts as a standard against which the behavior and actions of the public officials and political office holders can be measured. The complexities and dynamism of human decisions often demand more than one theory to meet the exigencies of an ethical dilemma (Felix, Ahmad, & Arshad, 2015).

Lawrence Kohlberg (1969) remains a reference point whenever moral judgment level is being considered, and his theory of CMD highlights the processes of moral judgment. Individuals move from the stages to the highest which is the post-conventional stage; therefore, principled reasoning or ethical reasoning is based on individual capacity to develop
to the highest level. Individuals at the early stage occupy themselves with what is right due largely to fear of punishment (Stage 1), or exchange in relationship a sort of give and take (Stage 2), while those on conventional level do what is right based on expectation of others (Stage 3). By Stage 4, individuals are principle minded and decide what is right due to their cherished values and standards irrespective of divergent views, and at Stage 5, individuals are concerned with justice, rights, and fair play, while Stage 6 is more of a theory than practicable as at now.

Kohlberg’s theory has been simplified into a manageable form (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999) while retaining the core elements of the old theory. Those individuals with a higher level of moral reasoning are admired by subordinates as transformational leaders (Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, & Milner, 2002). From an individual values perspective, power and achievement will attract an observer’s attention and will likely enhance the observer’s desire to emulate the modeled individual behavior. Empirical studies that examined cognitive moral reasoning and TFL are rare. Equally, managers with high level of ethical reasoning were perceived as transformational leaders (Turner et al., 2002), leadership motivated by ethics and shared values, a social learning process (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Therefore, from empirical results and related theories, it is posited that cognitive moral reasoning will positively enhance TFL behavior to impact significantly on followers’ general moral behavior and level reasoning.

Leadership connotes exchange, expectation, and reciprocity which are the hallmarks of subordinates–leadership relationship. Thus, we argue that compromising high ethical behavior in TFL will engender such relationships, as leaders with low or high level CMD will exhibit commensurate or discriminating behavioral pattern. Bass (1985) empirically analyzed TFL and developed four items of measure as propelling follower’s perception of values and mission and vision, make followers abandon personal interest for organizational needs.

**Sample and Sampling Technique**

A stratified sampling method was adopted due to the diversity of ministries mandate and the likely diversity equally in style of leadership and individual belief system. The essence is to gain more insight into the perception of employees on leadership styles (Sekaran, 2009). Four ministries were randomly selected from the 10 ministries that were not affected by the recent mergers and equally are the core ministries with the largest population based on statistical report (The Civil Service Commission, 2013). The total of employees of the four ministries is 14,337. Using the simplified sampling table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a total sample size of 375 is deemed adequate for the study. However, the researcher decided to even it up to 400, the reason is to enhance a large response rate as Nigeria is characterized by a poor response to survey research.

**Instrumentation**

A survey questionnaire was used to collect data from respondents to achieve the desired objectives. This is in respect to the nature of the formulated hypotheses in this study. For cognitive, moral development (CMD; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau et al., 1999) v the DIT-2 questionnaire, which is in two parts containing the instructions and stories of ethical, social problems, as well as questions on ethical issues raised was used, respondents were to rate and rank most important arguments that influenced their decisions (p score). The dimensions of TFL style were measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ X5; Avolio & Bass, 2004). The instrument was divided into three sections, namely, demographic factors, ethical reasoning, and the transformational leadership style. Respondents were required to answer questions on ethical reasoning/value orientation (CMD) using a 5-point Likert-type scale adopted from a series of ethical dilemmas/value estimates and scenarios developed by eminent scholars (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).

**Method**

This study is a quantitative research conducted in a cross-sectional design to examine the effect of cognitive moral reasoning on TFL style in the Nigerian public sector. The target populations of this study are the employees of the Kebbi State public service, and the population frame was obtained from the State’s Civil Service Commission (2013) Kebbi that controls the various ministries in the state. Kebbi State is in the Northwestern part of Nigeria and it was primarily selected for this study because it is one of the largest and most populated geopolitical zones in the country with an estimated population of about 10 million out of the total estimated Nigerian population of 140 million; therefore, Kebbi State represents a viable zone in Nigeria’s public sector organization.

**Data Analysis**

Partial Least Square–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) software (Ringle, Wende, & Will, 2005) was used for the analysis of the collected data in this study. In addition, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for the descriptive analyses of the respondents. To measure the significance of linear bivariate, between the cognitive, moral development (CMD), and transformational leadership. A regression analysis was used to meet the objective of the research. The choice of PLS-SEM in this study is based on the fact that PLS suits complexities of models due largely to its flexibility in development and validation of models. Therefore, SmartPLS 2.0 (M3) was chosen to establish, construct, measurement and structural models in this study.
The measurement model was evaluated by assessing the convergent validity, which is measured by loading, the average variance extracted (AVE), and the composite reliability (CR) result. The result revealed good items loading above the recommended threshold (0.5) by Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (2014). Also, the result of the AVE indicates a value of 0.580 for TFL style, but no value for CMD because it was measured by a single item. Concerning the CR result which measures the internal consistency of the measurement instrument, the analysis found a value of 0.846 for TFL style. The values of the CR are greater than the threshold value of 0.7 recommended by Hair et al. (2014), which indicate a good reliable measure of the measurement instrument. In addition, the finding revealed an $R^2$ value of .142, indicating that 14.2% variance in TFL style was explained by the cognitive moral reasoning (CMD). The summary of the measurement model in this study is presented in Table 1.

### Table 1. Summary of the Measurement Model Result.

| Construct | Items | Loading | AVE  | CR    | $R^2$ |
|-----------|-------|---------|------|-------|-------|
| CMD       | Single item |        | 0.580 | 0.846 | .142  |
| TFL       | TFL7   | 0.821   |      |       |       |
|           | TFL3   | 0.698   |      |       |       |
|           | TFL4   | 0.698   |      |       |       |

Note. AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability; CMD = cognitive moral development; TFL = transformational leadership.

### Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity indicates whether the concept under investigation in a study is unique in a model (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). Applying the Fornel and Lacker's criterion, achieved by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted values with the correlation values of each latent variable in the model (Fornel & Larcker, 1981), the result shows that the AVE value of each construct is greater than its highest correlation with any other constructs in the model, which thereby indicates the achievement of discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014). Table 2 presents the result of the discriminant validity.

### Table 2. Discriminant Validity.

| Construct | Single item | TFL  |
|-----------|-------------|-----|
| CMD       | Single item |     |
| TFL       | 0.100       | 0.762 |

Note. CMD = cognitive moral development; TFL = transformational leadership.

### Findings

Empirical results of previous studies are inconsistent largely due to factor optimal structure which requires further confirmatory analysis. The analysis of the demographic profile of the respondents revealed that the largest proportion representing 79% of the respondents are from the ministry of education. The major percentage, 27.7% have between 6 and 10 years working experience, 22.5% have between 1 and 5 years of working experience, 26.3% have between 11 and 15 years of working experience, and only 23.5% of the respondents have more than 16 years of working experience. In addition, 56.5% of the respondents are male, while 43.5% are female. Moreover, the majority of the respondents are Muslims, 47.4%; 39.6% are Christians; and 13.0% are in the group of other religions. Concerning the age of the respondents, 26.3% are between 30 and 39 years, 27.0% are between 20 and 29 years of age, 26.7% are between 40 and 49 years of age, while 20.0% are more than 50 years of age. Furthermore, 22.5% of the respondents are senior executive officers of their respective organizations, 17.9% are chief executive officers, and 26.3% are supervisors, while the remaining 33.3% are at a non-supervisory grade position. In the aspect of the respondents’ educational qualification, 15.4% of the respondents have master’s degree, 25.6% have a bachelor’s degree, and 12.3% are doctoral degree holders, while the remaining 22.8 have diploma and 23.9% have a higher school qualifications. The results of the demographic analysis are presented in Table 3.

### Research Question 1: What is the level of CMD of the Nigerian public sector officials?
This study used Defining Issues Test (DIT-2) by Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau et al., (1999), which focuses the schema used by individuals in solving ethical issues and which determines the respondent’s stage of moral reasoning. The result shows that the major proportion, 65.61%, of the respondents are at the preconvention stage of moral reasoning and 20% are at the conventional stage, while 14.39% are at the post-conventional stage of moral reasoning. Table 4 presents the summary of the moral reasoning level of the respondents.

Research Question 2: To what extent does CMD relate to TFL style in the Nigerian public sector?

In testing the stated research questions of this study, the structural model was assessed through the PLS path analysis. Table 5 shows the result of the standard path coefficients (β), standard error, t value, and the decision taken on the hypotheses. The result found a statistical significant relationship between CMD and TFL style (β = 0.239, t = 4.072, p < .014).

Discussion

The motive behind this study was to examine the degree of public sector officials’ CMD and its relationship with TFL behavior as perceived by the subordinates. We proposed that CMD is related to TFL style as perceived by the subordinates and it was significantly supported as leaders operating at a
higher stage of moral reasoning will exhibit more TFL behavior. Idealized influence attracts respect and admiration of subordinates, demonstrate the features of a moral individual and moral leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). It instills respect and trust on followers. Inspirational motivation compels transformational leaders reflect on moral caring attitude and sincere interest in the development of their followers as they lead by example, acceptable to the subordinates who equally emulate them. While through intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, transformational leaders appreciate the subordinates’ personal attributes and potentials with regard to their individual requirements and aspirations.

These findings seem predictive, as transformational leaders motivate and mentor their subordinates for self and organizational benefits, and this is direct opposite of transactional leadership which is more assertive and performance oriented. Leaders with lower level moral reasoning stage exhibit less transformational leadership qualities, while those in the middle (Conventional Stage) apply either pre-conventional or post-conventional reasoning, and this supports earlier theorists (e.g., Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Kimberling, 2008; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987; Turner et al., 2002). Therefore, our argument is that public leaders with higher CMD exhibit more TFL behaviors, and impact more positively on subordinates’ general ethical make-up and moral behavior. Transactional leadership behavior is more in use between subordinate-leaders relations in the Nigeria public sector.

**Conclusion**

We gave an insight to further buttress current knowledge about CMD and TFL behavior and advocated an agenda for further studies. Leaders exhibiting post-conventional moral reasoning are inclined to use TFL behavior and are perceived as such by the subordinates (Treviño, 1986; Turner et al., 2002). Ethical reasoning is not the only barometer to measure moral development as they are varieties of models (Chen McCain, Tsai, & Bellino, 2010). This adds value and increased our understanding of both concepts as it will guide leadership training tailor measured to suit the realities on the ground. Therefore, further studies are advocated to investigate other intervening elements as other individual moral motivational values and TFL behavior. Similarly, an insight into other mechanisms will spur future studies. The research reveals that ethical reasoning correlates to TFL style, which enhances ethicality of followers and the organization. Thus, this research work maintains and concludes that the findings have been able to address the research questions and the study’s objectives.

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