Impacts of Religious Biases on Leadership Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

The subtle nature of bias can cause leaders to be unaware of religiously based influences. The outcome can be both positive and negative. The leader can make decisions that are more effective by maximizing useful paradigms and constructs, or make less effective and inappropriate decisions through lack of evaluation of alternative approaches, data and responses. In either scenario, understanding one's internal nature is integral to maximizing one's leadership abilities. This qualitative study examined how United States commissioned and noncommissioned military leaders stationed in Europe described effects of religion and their religious upbringing on their decision-making process, and how they viewed the quality of those decisions. With one exception, all the leaders drew connections between their views of how they viewed their decisions and their religious or spiritual backgrounds. The study revealed prominent themes: (a) there is a presence of religious beliefs that helps guide leaders in making their decision, (b) leaders see an importance of religious principles in the decisions leaders make, (c) moral principles are involved in decisions, (d) leaders believe that the rightness of decisions can be innate and transcendent (e) humans have intrinsic, naturally occurring spiritual beliefs that mankind can use to guide decisions, (f) there is a right-wrong aspect of decisions, and (g) decisions can be based on the ethical values of the decision-maker.

DEDICATION

To my father, Dr. Robert-Louis Gasser, who has been sorely missed these past 15 years,

for his confidence in me, for the life and spiritual values he instilled in me, for the love

and respect he gave me for all education, and for my love of music.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The research addressed religious biases and impacts of religious biases upon the quality of military leadership decisions within commissioned and noncommissioned officers of United States Armed Forces within Europe. The research methodology was a qualitative phenomenological study interview approach, utilizing a concurrent nested strategy with an embedded quantitative component (Creswell, 1994). The significance of this study included effects of religious biases that can predetermine specific unconscious and conscious inclusions and exclusions of data. The selection of data from which to make leadership decisions can preclude leaders from considering specific approaches and alternatives when viewing issues presented, due to violations of personal belief systems (Sipe, 2000). Inversely, religious biases based upon historical precedence and successful application, might serve as methods, arguments and heurisms to simplify complex situations and thus improve the quality of decisions made. The significant outcome of the study was to identify positive and negative impacts of religious biases on leadership decision making. Chapter 1 details the background of the study, the problem and purpose of the study, the significance and nature of the study with its associated theoretical framework, and the scope and limitations of the study.

Background of the Problem

The subtle nature of bias can cause leaders to be unaware of religiously based influences (Hunter, 2001). The outcome can be both positive and negative. The leader can make more effective decisions through the use of maximizing useful paradigms and constructs (Toney & Oster, 1998) or make less effective and inappropriate decisions through lack of evaluation of alternative approaches, data and responses (Hunter, 2001).

In either scenario, understanding one's internal nature is integral to maximizing one's leadership abilities (Schein, 1992).

Within literature concerning leadership decision-making processes, a recurrent theme is the need to eliminate or mitigate internal biases that impact the objective analysis of available options (Bass, 1990; Cooper & Sawaf, 1997). Awareness of biases includes the need for the leader to have as objective a view of as many available options as possible, unchanged by wants, desires, stereotypes, or omissions of data (Schein, 1992). In some leadership/management decision-making situations, having biased information upon which the leader formulates decisions can be directly linked to safety or wellness of those affected by such decisions (Roberto, 2002).

Leaders describe how their spirituality or religious background directly contributes to their decisions (Ellis, 2004). As many leaders and managers acknowledge their use of religious background and training (Light, 2003), there is a need for leaders to understand ways in which religious belief systems influence decision-making paradigms and approaches. Leadership that recognizes its dependence on religion and religious principles as aids in the decision-making process can be viewed differently than leadership that does not recognize such dependencies. Leaders that rely on such approaches to leadership decisions can reach different decisions based on the same raw information to form such decisions (Zaleznik, 1986).

One of the research challenges in this area concerns the problem of the study of bias where the term bias is considered as a synonym for stereotyping or prejudice. Many bias studies are designed to study the prejudicial effects of various types of bias with the intention of demonstrating a causal relationship between bias and specific actions an

individual might take in response to such bias (Armour, 1995; Perl & Bendyna, 2002; Sipe, 2000). The definition of bias within this study directly addresses the differentiation of the term bias that does not include these connotations.

Problem Statement

The general problem is that bias can influence the quality of decision-making (Anderson, 1990). Biases can affect decision evaluation, group think scenarios, data selection, contingent reinforcement, and can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (Bass, 1990). Further, belief systems vary frameworks from which meaning itself is derived (Wittgenstein, 1968).

Religious biases can cause profound shifts in perceptions (Hodgkinson, 2002). Biases can vary data analysis conclusions by over 8% for every point of analysis (Bass, 1990). Leaders may be unaware of the existence of impacts and influences of religious biases on their decisions (Hodgkinson, 2002). The specific problem addressed by this research is how religious bias influences military decision-making processes. This is to be investigated through descriptions of different ways in which military organization leaders conceptualize influences of religious bias on the quality of their leadership decisions.

The ability of military leaders to have unrestrained consideration of available options in decision-making processes, directly influences the effectiveness of leaders (Anderson, 1990). Recognition of internal biases gives leaders decision-making options by allowing them to become aware of limitations. Twenty armed forces commissioned and noncommissioned officers in Europe would be interviewed. QSR (N6) software was used to quantify themes (Moustakas, 1994). A qualitative methodology for this study is

appropriate as it will identify invariant, prominent and emergent themes of qualitative data provide ranking in terms of importance to enhance validity and reliability (Creswell, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study with taped and transcribed interviews assessed through conversational analysis software was to explore how military leaders view how religious bias influences their leadership decision-making processes, and to describe different ways in which military organization leaders conceptualize the influence of religious bias on the quality of leadership decisions. A phenomenological research study was appropriate as the study investigates research questions capturing the essence of how leaders view influences that their personal religious belief systems have made on the quality of their decisions, without injecting researcher-based biases into the study of the lived experiences of the commissioned and noncommissioned officers interviewed.

Purposive, snowball and intensity sampling techniques helped to assure a large sample population of both sexes and various levels of responsibility within the commissioned and noncommissioned officer corps in Europe. This qualitative phenomenological research method was appropriate as the research data concerns subjective data derived from individual responses to the research question, and the research design is appropriate for collecting and analyzing phenomenological data (Berg, 2004). Twenty United States Armed Forces commissioned and noncommissioned officers in Europe were selected using purposive, snowball and intensity sampling to record experiences of impacts of religious biases have had on their leadership decision-making

in terms of their lived experiences. The study identified invariant, prominent and emergent themes generated by personal interviews, and questions regarding the knowledge and beliefs of those interviewed. For the purposes of this research study, the central phenomenon of religious biases on military leadership decision-making was broadly defined as the interactions between a personal belief system, which individuals have adopted to help form views of the religious, sacred, transcendent and supernatural beliefs, and the leader's military decisions

This research study was a qualitative study analyzing the self-evaluation of interviewees regarding how the leaders themselves retroactively view their decisions and the religious component that they used to make their decisions. The self-evaluation included how the interviewees view the quality of their decisions. How an individual views the correctness or the effectiveness of their decisions can effect how they make decisions in the future (Roberto, 2002).

<div align="center">Significance of the Study</div>

Leaders can include additional information and modify their approaches to decision-making by becoming aware of their biases and consequences of such biases (Sipe, 2000). Having this understanding of themselves and their decision-making biases and approaches may allow leaders to, improve decision quality, increase acceptance by followers of decisions and generate quicker decisions. As the sample group of this study was that of commissioned and noncommissioned officers of the United States military, this study was of specific significance for military officers in their leadership decision-making approaches.

A core problem addressed by this research was how religious biases alter the quality of leadership decisions. Leadership requires having an informed background from which to evaluate the context for the content of information that the leader has assimilated (Schein, 1992). Many forms of bias can modify how leaders perceive the reality and importance of a given datum or concept (Dimson, Marsh, & Staunton, 2004). By evaluating both the information available to the leader, as well as the way in which the leader views information, then the leader can analyze this information within the context of the decision to be made (Wittgenstein, 1968).

Religious biases pose a potential problem to leaders, as they can be unaware of the profound shifts in perceptions and responses that these biases create (Hodgkinson, 2002. Understanding the nature and breadth of biases and how biases modify an individual's perceptions of information (Anderson, 1990) is essential in understanding the context in which information can be analyzed for decision-making by leaders (Wittgenstein, 1980). However, religious biases can be important frameworks from which data can be evaluated for relevancy, usefulness, and truth (Laszlo, Laszlo, Romero, & Compos, 2003). By developing expertise in the use of a broad range of tools, and by understanding various aspects of bias, decision-makers can make decisions based on this expanded understanding of issues facing them (Anderson, 1990).

<center>Significance of the Study to the Field of Leadership</center>

There are many studies in literature concerning various forms of bias. Some of these studies approach the analysis of bias in terms of prejudging a person or situation, or actively supporting propositions about how leaders react to another person or given situation (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Hsee, 2004; Sipe, 2000). In the same manner,

this study addressed the specific issue of impacts of both conscious and unconscious influences of religious biases on military decision-making ability, as well as both positive and negative outcomes of such biases. As an outcome, the research provides information for military leaders to improve the quality of their decision-making process. Decision-makers who do not have effective means to evaluate the accuracy, and validity of information leave themselves open to making less than optimal decisions (Williams, 1996).

This study will help leaders consider more options in decision-making approaches as impacts of unconscious and conscious religious biases can constrain or limit specific alternative approaches to leadership problems and issues. The resultant worldviews can be incorporated into leaders' subconscious at such a deep level that the decision making process precludes evaluation of specific alternative approaches to problems (Burris & Navara, 2002). For leaders, in addition to requiring accurate and complete data to evaluate approaches to problems, leaders could benefit from clearly understanding limitations to the processes they use to evaluate these approaches. As religious biases and belief system biases exist at a subconscious level, leaders might not be aware of these internal biases and therefore are unaware of influences of various potential approaches to analyze problems and potential approaches to solutions. Alternatively, leaders might be able more fully to utilize a validated bias or belief system once the leader understands its benefits and support systems (Ellis, 2004). This study will analyze the presence of such influences in military decision-making, and will document how these military leaders view the impact of religious biases on the decisions that these leaders have made.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative, phenomenological research design is appropriate as this study explores qualitatively and investigates quantitatively a research question with an orientation towards capturing the essence of the phenomena without injecting researcher-based biases into the study of the lived experiences of the commissioned and noncommissioned officers interviewed. A qualitative research method focuses on derived meaning and analyses of emergent themes from interviewees' life experiences (Creswell, 1994). The study predominately consisted of qualitative interviews of military leaders, and included a quantitative summary of the analysis of common patterns within the interview files. The study objective was to investigate impacts of religious biases on the quality of leadership decision-making, by interviewing 20 United States armed forces commissioned and noncommissioned officers stationed in Europe, which is an appropriate number of case studies for phenomenological case-study research methods (Berg, 2004). Twenty armed forces officers were interviewed for this study. There was one data collection phase encompassing the gathering and development of qualitative and derived quantitative data (Creswell, 2003). Each interview with an armed forces leader was considered as a single case study in the research (Creswell, 2003). Although the qualitative data generated from the case studies served as the primary tool used to answer the research question, a summary of the interview information was derived from the responses and supplemented by analysis with QSR (N6) analysis software (Creswell, 1998).

Appropriateness of Design

Purposive, snowball and intensity sampling techniques helped to assure a large sample population of both sexes and various levels of responsibility within the officer corps in Europe. This population of United States Armed Forces commissioned and noncommissioned officers was selected from United States Armed Forces bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. Various themes about religious-based belief systems were derived as a result of hermeneutic analysis of narratives recorded. During the interviews, the commissioned and noncommissioned officers described how they viewed the roles that religious belief systems have in the manner in which these leaders make decisions (Berg, 2004). Alternatively, by relying on internally tested biases and belief systems that the leader has already tested and found valid, these biases could help support decision-making processes and could result in higher quality decisions (Ellis, 2004).

The summary quantitative data of the investigation utilized QSR (N6) software to quantify various invariant, prominent, and emergent themes, structural relationships, key words, and contextual concepts (Creswell, 1998). The summary elements served to support and strengthen the study; as well as provide a foundation for future researchers to verify, validate and replicate the research results (Creswell, 1994). Concepts and themes were ranked in importance and placed in context (Moustakas, 1994). The summary quantitative aspect of the study can help to provide a capability to explore themes from both content and contextual views (Creswell, 2003).

Appropriateness of Method

The overall qualitative approach of the study was appropriate as themes related to the research question required fundamental exploration and can be expected to form a holistic view of the interviewee's descriptions of their views of how religious backgrounds impact decision-making (Creswell, 1994). A qualitative method is recommended when the researcher is to explore subjective, religious and transpersonal phenomenon as compared to alternative methodologies (Berg, 2004).

This study was based on a series of personal interviews with 20 United States Armed Forces commissioned and noncommissioned officers. Interviews were conducted until no new invariant or prominent themes emerged. Interviewees were asked an open-ended question about their perceptions regarding the impact of their religious beliefs upon their decision-making approaches and the quality of the resultant decision outcome. By the organization of these responses into invariant, prominent and emergent themes of responses, the study showed how specific approaches towards decision-making approaches were influenced by religious biases.

<div align="center">Research Question</div>

This study attempted to gain an understanding of both positive and negative influences of religious belief systems on the quality of leadership decision-making process of military leaders through the analysis of recorded interviews of the life experiences of United States armed forces leaders. To accomplish this goal, the following general research questions were addressed:

Research Question 1: Do religious biases influence how leadership decisions are made?

Research Question 2: In what ways do religious biases alter the quality of leadership decisions made?

An aspect of researching these questions involved how the concept of quality itself is defined. For this study, the concept of quality of decisions made was defined as that of how an individual views the correctness or the effectiveness of his or her decisions when viewed from the context of the results of the effects and correctness of these decisions (Roberto, 2002). The self-modifying effects of making what are self-viewed as the correctness and effectiveness of previous decision-making choices in the decision-making process is an important aspect in the role that religious biases have in the decision-making process (Smith & Wang, 1997).

To make the highest quality decisions possible, leaders need the ability to consider all available options in the decision-making processes (Bass, 1990). Recognizing and becoming aware of the bias-based influences in decision-making processes can allow leaders to expand their options by assessing approaches to circumvent or exploit these biases or maximize the use of support approaches to decision-making processes (Dimson et al., 2004). As the quality of leadership decisions is subjective in nature, interviewee's self-evaluation of how their retrospective reactions to their decisions made will form the basis for assessment of the quality of decisions made.

Research Proposition 1: Religious biases alter the quality of leadership decisions made. As the leader constructs meaning from context of situations observed (Wittgenstein, 1980), religious biases provide a framework from which to evaluate potential decisions (Burris & Navara, 2002). Without such a framework from which to make evaluations, there would be an inconsistent set of internal criteria for evaluation,

thus leading to decisions of varying quality levels, with the evaluation of quality levels viewed from the effects of the decisions by the leaders themselves (DeConinck & Lewis, 1997).

Research Proposition 2: Religious biases alter the quality of leadership decisions made in specific ways.

Having a religious bias includes inserting ethical and moral considerations into the leadership decision-making process. The biases eventually influence how such decisions are viewed in the larger contexts of time (Anderson, 1990) and in viewpoints and frameworks of internal and external organizational cultures (Senge, 1990/1994).

Study factors of interest

Although this study was a qualitative study, for the purpose of understanding the scope of the research, a study factor investigated was the quality of leadership decisions made as viewed in retrospect by those interviewed. Other related factors of this study included the interviewee's religious biases. Effects associated with these factors included organizational effectiveness, strategic and tactical effectiveness, communication of leader and organizational vision, and decision-making ability. The preliminary inclusion of these broad factors associated with these variables within this qualitative study were used to focus and guide the study and analysis of the information garnered through the interview and analysis processes.

Theoretical Framework

The broad theoretical framework for this study is deduced decision-making, including the deduced model for achieving quality decisions, the Vroom-Yetton model, diagnostic modes, Model B, and Maier's and Field's models (Bass, 1990). Any conscious

or unconscious construct of a worldview can influence the ability of the leader to make a correct decision. These constructs lead to potentially less optimal or potentially better decision quality (Hodgkinson, 2002). By becoming aware of the effects of such internally held biases, leaders can employ these constructs consciously to support decision-making processes. This will then allow the leader potentially to have a better understanding of the factors that impact their personal decision-making process (Smith & Wang, 1997).

Within this broad theoretical framework of decision-making, the area of the study of biases and how biases influences decision making has been addressed in numerous studies (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Dimson et al., 2004; Sipe, 2000). Specifically, Dr. Daniel Gilbert of Harvard University, has posited that cognitive mechanisms within people lead to specific and predictive judgments concerning decision making choices (Gilbert, Wilson, Pinel, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). These choices can be made based upon unconscious biases that the decision maker holds, such as: for seeking pleasure (Hsee, Zhang, Yu, & Xi, 2003), having concern only about immediate consequences (Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000), reacting to negative events (Gilbert et al., 1998), and consideration of contexts of choices (Gilbert & Malone, 1995)or other assignable cause construct (Hsee, 2004).

One approach to using bias in a positive fashion can be by recognizing one's bias, and making arguments in a contrarian fashion. By considering opposites, a leader can help create unbiased arguments for decision-making constructs (Hirt & Markman, 1995). By actively using a leader's bias for deterministic counter arguments, leaders can use the structure of their world-view to come to decisions that have considered multiple points of view. This structure can thereby be used to generate a biased-neutral conclusion to a

leader's deliberations (Armour, 1995). One constraint to understanding limitations that biases cause is that the nature of biases themselves tends to be unrealized by individuals.

Predominant theories of leadership which drive this research include those of transformational leadership (Banner & Gagné, 1995), perceptual and cognitive theories including attribution and rational-deductive approaches (Ellis, 2004), and values based leadership and behavioral theories (Bass, 1990). These theories have an embedded basis in how leaders view their effectiveness through a filter of their own belief systems (Wittgenstein, 1980). This study investigates connections between leadership decision-making and religious biases as religious belief system tend to have significant impact on how people derive meaning (Frankl, 1984), and religion can be a primary factor in how people determine a sense of ethical behavior (Clark & Dawson, 1996).

Evidence of religious activities and belief systems date back for more than 60,000 years, and include anthropological evidence for more than two million years (Pagels, 1995). These belief systems and religious activities could have been used to help explain natural events, which helped people understand how to live in the presence of actions of weather, earthquakes, eclipses, and other natural phenomena in less fear and angst (Houtman & Bakker, 1989). Leaders of tribes and religious sects and organizations help to define meaning to their communities by giving frameworks of understanding of principles derived through examination of both natural phenomena and of concepts derived from human interaction with natural phenomena (Pagels, 1995).

Various theorists have attempted to create theories of religious developments, and consequent influences, or biases, on human constructs of truth. British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor postulated that early peoples believed that spirits, which he

referred to as *animae* controlled natural phenomena. Therefore, if people through their religious leadership structure, appeased or worshiped these *animae*, then desired results would be forthcoming (Tylor, 1958). Fredich Max Muller, a linguist of the mid and late 1800's determined that although he agreed with Tylor regarding spirit worship, he disagreed that spirits themselves dwelled in natural occurrences, and postulated that people determined that nature itself had human attributes, such as emotion. These attributes then were transformed into deities, and the earliest concepts of gods (Masuzawa, 1993). Rudolf Otto, a German religious scholar of the early 1900's posited that all persons are able to have the capacity to recognize sacredness when encountered, and that truth, goodness, beauty, and appreciation of humanity are intrinsic aspects of human beings, and those that recognize these attributes can use this awareness to lead their organizations (Otto, 1950).

Psychological theories, often with religious constructs and aspects directly relate to the study of why and how human beings act and interact with each other (Flew, 1979), which is critical for leaders to understand in their leadership decision-making approaches (Bass, 1990). From the earliest of recorded times, philosophers, such as Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas studied behavior primarily from a religious viewpoint (Moser & Nat, 2003). René Descartes differentiated the body and mind into interacting structures with strong influences on each other, thus allowing humans to think and reason. This theory was expanded by Thomas Hobbs, John Locke, David Hume, and George Berkeley who believed that the mind had no prior knowledge at birth, and that knowledge came from the physical senses and intuitive experiences of that person's lifetime (Moser & Nat, 2003). These theories were followed by schools of structuralism,