

Moral Leadership: An Indigenous Construct or a Universal Phenomenon?

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Since Farh & Cheng (2000) proposed moral leadership as one of the dimensions of Chinese paternalistic leadership, it has been considered an indigenous leadership construct emerged from Confucian doctrine of self-cultivation. For the past ten years, several important follow-up studies have clarified the nature of it and evidenced its favorable effects on subordinate performance. As this leadership construct gradually developed, Western scholars also defined a similar term, ethical leadership, as a leader's normatively appropriate conduct and his or her promotion of such morality. When Western literature on leadership further traced ethical leadership to Aristotle's philosophy, researchers interested in Chinese moral leadership started to wonder whether moral leadership is truly an indigenous leadership construct that only exists in Chinese settings. To probe this question, I first review literature on moral leadership and that on ethical leadership separately, and then compare these two constructs from three perspectives: (1) cultural origins, (2) underlying mechanisms, and (3) behavioral demonstration. Accordingly, I propose a framework that integrates the two leadership constructs. I argue that at the definition and the conceptualization level, moral or ethical leadership is universal and can be observed across different cultural settings. However, its dimensions and explicit display are culture-specific; it consists of disparate sets of behavioral patterns in different contexts. Based on this newly proposed framework, I identify several fruitful future research directions.

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