How Moral Identity Influences Leadership Ethics: A Historical Case Study

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This historical case study of U. S. Presidents Kennedy and Nixon explored how individual moral identity can influence leadership ethics in decision making. The study examined how four key influences of education, family, peers, and religion could affect a leader's ability to make ethical or unethical decisions. Data analysis determined emergent themes from these influences to establish positive or negative moral identity development. Study results contributed to the literature by demonstrating how moral identity influences that emphasize societal welfare versus a self-focus can affect a leader's ability to make ethical or unethical decisions.

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“Core themes demonstrating a concern for the welfare of others typically aligned with positive moral identity development; whereas, core themes demonstrating a self-focus generally aligned with negative moral identity development.”

According to Engelbrecht and van Aswegen (2009), leadership ethics determine the ethical climate within an organization because the leader's value system establishes the moral direction (Johnson, 2009). Because of these insights, increased public awareness of unethical practices reveals an emerging interest in leadership ethics (Avey, Palanski, & Wernsing, 2012). In this area of scholarship, an emerging area of interest relative to leadership ethics considers the relationship of individual moral identity and the role it plays in ethical and unethical decisions (Hunter, 2012). Review of the literature revealed the evolution of ethical and moral ideology within individuals from early philosophical and theoretical constructs to current research. Study of the literature provided a cornerstone of understanding of these concepts relative to leadership ethics; but it also revealed that understanding moral identity development represented an essential component to understanding the underpinnings of ethical and unethical leadership.
This historical case study investigated how leader moral identity contributed to a leader's ability to make ethical or unethical decisions. Through the use of a perceived ethical organizational leader and an unethical organizational leader, the study examined the four moral identity influences of education, family, peers, and religion relative to ethical and unethical decision-making practices. An extensive case history of two former presidents from the same era was used to compare and contrast individual moral identity development to reveal how moral identity affected ethical and unethical decision making. Assimilation of the discoveries obtained through this study enhanced understanding of the relevance of moral identity and how leaders make decisions within the context of modern organizations.

**Literature Review**

**Definitions**

According to Sockol (2009), people view moral identity from perspectives of individual character and social cognition. Early scholars defined moral identity as the individual's dedication to moral values and a focus on the protection of societal welfare (Atkins, Ford, & Hart, 1998). Jones (1991) defined an ethical decision “as a decision that is both legal and morally acceptable to the larger community” (p. 367). The converse proved true for an unethical decision because societal norms disapproved of the illegality and moral unacceptability of the decision to the community. While people can understand the parameters of legal versus illegal aspects because societies rely on established written or cultural standards, the concept of “morally acceptable” proves more difficult. What a person views as ethical and morally acceptable could prove just the opposite with another individual, group, organization, or culture.

**Theoretical Background**

Ancient philosophers advocated the concept of ethics to instill the development of individual character and promote a positive society (Avey, Palanski, & Wernsing, 2012). The earliest philosophical foundation regarding virtue ethics and moral behavior evolved from early Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Socrates ascribed to the concept of virtue ethics. In the writing of Crito by Plato (n.d./1900), Socrates established that one who knew virtue (ethics) would act in a virtuous (ethical) manner. The concept of ethics originated from the Greek word ethos, which translated means “character” or “moral character” as shown in Rhetoric when Aristotle discussed the moral nature of the speaker (Aristotle, n.d./1833, p. 12). In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle (n.d./1813; n.d./1908) expanded on ethics and moral behavior by noting that society considered a person as virtuous if the individual acted in alignment with virtuous ideologies.

Subsequent philosophers and theorists proposed different theoretical ideas regarding moral behavior, ethics, and moral identity. In An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke (1690/1775) suggested that personal identity depended on an individual's consciousness. As a result, he linked conscious self-identity to moral agency. Similarly, Smith (1759/1761) posited in The Theory of Moral Sentiments that an ethical decision maker used moral principles and acted in a morally responsible manner. Kant (1785/2008) also developed a universal moral standard known as the categorical imperative in which an individual must respond to decisions through a moral process that complied with universal law acceptable to mankind and not on personal desires.
Piaget (1932) first proposed the cognitive-developmental model known as Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development to explain how the cognitive development of a child related to moral development. Kohlberg (1971) expanded on the concept of individual moral development in Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development, which stated that the ability to determine right or wrong using moral reasoning consisted of six stages designated by preconventional, conventional, and postconventional levels. The ability to think in a moral capacity at the preconventional level existed for individuals at the lowest levels, such as children in grade school. Kohlberg characterized the first stage with an obedience and punishment social orientation motivated by a threat of punishment, whereas he characterized the second stage by individualistic behavior compelled by self-interests. In the conventional level, Kohlberg described the third stage as good boy and good girl where the individual sought the approval of others. In the fourth stage, known as law and order, an individual adhered to societal laws to perform a duty. In the postconventional level, Kohlberg noted most adults did not achieve the fifth stage of social contract because it involved caring about the well-being of other individuals. In stage six of principled conscience, the individual carried a respect for universal values and demonstrated individual conscience (Kohlberg, 1971). In a modification of prior work by Kohlberg, Rest’s Four Component Model of Moral Development theorized that an individual must develop the four moral components of character, judgment, motivation, and sensitivity to ensure moral maturity and correctness. Development of these four components provided an individual with the ability to note issues, make good decisions, remain motivated to act when necessary, and possess the character to remain a moral individual (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999).

In Blasi’s Model of Moral Identity, Blasi (1983) suggested that the moral identity component of personal identity influenced moral behavior because of the interaction of individual moral judgment and the resultant moral action. In another model of moral identity, Hart and Matsuba (2009) posited how enduring qualities, social influence, and characteristic adaptations made up individual moral identity. Enduring qualities consisted of stable influences of personality and social influence that established the foundation of individual moral identity. Personality consisted of three components: resiliency, overcontrol, and undercontrol. Individual resiliency allowed a person to remain unaffected by events whereas the other factors influenced whether the individual excessively controlled or lacked control of a situation. Social influences consisted of family structure as well as neighborhood and how each component influenced the individual from childhood into adulthood. Characteristic adaptations consisted of moral orientation, the self, emotions, and opportunity for action. Moral orientation consisted of individual attitudes, cognition, and moral values.

Current Research on Moral Identity

While a foundational component of moral character consists of personal (self) identity, an essential construct of personal identity consists of moral identity. Carlo and Hardy (2005) defined moral identity relative to how the construction of self-identity encompassed morality-based concerns and values. Because moral identity consisted as a subcomponent of individual moral maturation, moral identity contributed to individual moral cognition and the ability to take ethical action (Avolio, Hannah, & May, 2011). People who showed a closer affinity to internalization viewed
moral identity as a core component of their sense of self (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Cropanzano & Stein, 2009).

According to Poff (2010), core values relied on dedication to excellence and integrity as a foundation for ethical leadership. Johnson, Miller, and Schlenker (2009) determined that individuals who possessed higher levels of integrity demonstrated moral identities aligned with a strong moral compass. A leader’s trustworthiness and the ability of leaders to establish key relationships relied on the individual’s identity (Caldwell, 2009). Influences could enable internal ethical behavior. These aspects included family influence, education, spirituality, role models, level of honesty, integrity, courage, conscience, self-awareness, ability to adhere to one’s beliefs, personal control, and adherence to conduct codes (April, Locke, Mlambo, & Peters, 2010). Audi (2012) proposed that virtues consisted of a grounded internal construct within personal character that allowed an individual to engage in good conduct for appropriate reasons. This viewpoint aligned with research by Carter and Stets (2011, 2012), who determined that moral identity guided ethical behavior.

Research demonstrates that moral identity can affect individual morality. Further, leaders faced with ethical challenges may adopt different values influenced by several identities (Bagozzi, Charnigo, & Sekerka, 2009). In two empirical studies, Aquino, Duffy, and McFerran (2010) observed that moral identity and moral personality demonstrated a positive association with ethical ideology; conversely, ethical beliefs within individuals influenced personality, identity, and ethical behavior within organizations. Moral identity also showed a positive relationship to ethical leadership through moral identity symbolization and moral identity internalization (Aquino, Greenbaum, Kuenzi, & Mayer, 2012).

A high degree of moral identity can influence prosocial action toward others through moral elevation (Aquino, Laven, & McFerran, 2011). According to Arnold, Lawford, and Pratt (2009), studies of emerging adulthood linked moral identity and the ability to engage in prosocial behaviors. Miller and Schlenker (2011) determined that the integrity construct of moral identity can also affect relationships with others. Individuals who possess a strong moral identity within their construct do not appear to emulate unethical conduct of others compared to persons who possess a weak moral identity (Butterfield & O’Fallon, 2011). Aquino, Freeman, and Shao (2008) noted that differences in moral behavior appeared to emerge from the variance of individual social and cognitive viewpoints. In turn, leaders who demonstrated a complex and multifaceted self-construct that included values also performed better in the leadership role and served as positive role models (Hannah, Lord, & Woolfolk, 2009). Conversely, leaders who engaged in self-deception by denying their identity inhibited the ability to remain self-aware (Caldwell, 2009).

Different antecedents can contribute to individual moral identity such as religiosity and education. Researchers determined that self-control helped to mediate individual religiosity relative to moral identity (Ammeter et al., 2009). Further, Kadabadse and Rozuel (2010) revealed that people who embraced the spiritual component of self-identity demonstrated ethical behavior. Passini (2010) also noted the relevance of educational influences from family and schools that contributed to individual morality.

Current Research on Ethical and Unethical Decision Making
Ethical decision making emerged from two constructs of moral reason. The first construct relied
on individual feelings of morality, whereas the second construct involved the ability to reason about a situation (Bte Joned, Ling Meng, & Othman, 2011). Leaders who made moral decisions relied on individual virtues, such as honesty and justice, to accomplish morally justifiable results (Bagozzi et al., 2009); therefore, the implicit moral attitude of the leader influenced ethical decision outcomes (Hoeger & Marquardt, 2009).

Another positive influence relative to ethical decision making centers on moral centrality. In an empirical study, Frimer and Walker (2009) determined that concern for others predicted an individual’s ability to demonstrate ethical behavior, whereas the converse held true for people who showed high self-interest. Researchers discovered similar results in a study of contemplation versus self-interested conversation. In this study, self-interested conversations known as contemplation promoted ethical decision making, whereas self-interested conversations resulted in unethical decisions (Gunia, Huang, Murnighan, Wang, & Wang, 2012). Monroe (2009) also noted that moral choice relative to moral identity and how a person views oneself relative to other individuals affected the ability to make ethical decisions. Moral identity established the foundation and boundaries of moral choice (Monroe, 2011).

Moral intensity also influences ethical decision making. Researchers determined that the moral intensity components of social consensus, magnitude of consequences, temporal immediacy, proximity, and probability of effect influenced moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral intention when making ethical decisions (Jones, 1991). Thus, the ethical situation affected a person’s moral awareness, understanding of possible consequences, and moral intent when making ethical decisions (Holmes & Lincoln, 2011). In a similar construct, researchers determined that individuals who possessed self-awareness and who demonstrated a high level of mindfulness would more likely act in an ethical manner (Ruedy & Schweitzer, 2010).

In a meta-analytic study, researchers determined that numerous multidimensional characteristics determined unethical choices relative to intention and behavior. These components consisted of psychological and demographic characteristics within the individual, moral issue characteristics, and organizational environment characteristics. Psychological aspects consisted of a person’s cognitive moral development, idealistic attitudes, sense of satisfaction with work, center of control, Machiavellianism, and relativism. Demographics consisted of age, education, and gender. Moral characteristics consisted of the concentration of effect, magnitude of consequences, moral intensity, probability of effect, proximity, social consensus, and temporal immediacy. Organizational environment characteristics consisted of benevolent ethical climate, codes of conduct, the egoistic ethical climate, enforcement of codes of conduct, ethical culture, and the principled ethical climate (Harrison, Kish-Gephart, & Treviño, 2010).

The process of making ethical decisions presumes that one possesses the ability to recognize the moral aspects of a potential issue. Situations like this could result in moral stress reactions within the individual (Kallenberg, Larsson, Nilsson, & Sjoberg, 2011). Leadership stress could contribute to the ability of the leader to make ethical decisions because of dilemmas a leader may face relative to doing what is ethical compared to what constitutes the best decision for a company’s bottom line. For this reason, people should understand the influence of stress on a leader’s ability to make ethical decisions (Selart, 2010).

Demographic differences could also account for certain influences regarding decision making.
While research revealed no differences between Black versus White subjects, a survey-based study demonstrated clear differences between males and females relative to ethical decision making. Women appeared more willing to reject unethical actions, while males demonstrated a greater volition to engage in unethical conduct (Fok, Hartman, & Zee, 2009).

**Research Problem and Questions**

Though past research explored core values and moral identity in the conceptualization of ethical leaders versus unethical leadership (Brown & Mitchell, 2010), other research established a positive relationship between ethics and social responsibility (Godkin & Valentine, 2009). Research demonstrated that ethical leadership predicted citizenship behavior within organizational stakeholders (Bachrach, Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2011). However, studies failed to address the deeper elements of leadership morality foundations to determine how moral identity influenced leadership ethics. Jamnik (2012) noted that ethics resides within the hearts of people. To address unethical behavior of organizational leaders, scholars recognized that behavioral ethics research must focus on the psychological components of ethical leadership and personal awareness of morality (De Cremer, van Dijke, & Tenbrunsel, 2010). Therefore, the specific problem that this study intended to address was how moral identity affected ethical versus unethical decision making.

To focus on the problem outlined above, this historical case study examined moral identity influences and decision making of former U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy (JFK) and Richard M. Nixon (RMN) through exploration of the following questions:

**R1:** How did the moral identity constructs of Presidents Kennedy and Nixon contribute to ethical decision making?

**R2:** What role did the moral identity of Presidents Kennedy and Nixon play in individual perceptions of ethical conduct?

**Method**

This study used a qualitative historical case study method to perform in-depth analysis of personal moral identity relative to specific organizational leaders during particular historical events. Through the use of purposive sampling, the researcher focused on the selection of two leaders in the modern era with one leader possessing a reputation for ethical leadership and one leader possessing a reputation for unethical leadership. Because this historical case study required detailed biographical information of two leaders from which to evaluate individual moral identity relative to leadership decision making, the researcher needed to ensure the availability of substantive biographical data and archival records from reliable sources. Access to this information provided a complete understanding of the leader's childhood influences, such as family, religious upbringing, early education, peer influences, and other contributing factors to individual moral identity. Biographical data for organizational leaders within the private sector does exist to a limited extent through books, interviews, and other sources. However, biographical data of prior U.S. presidents exists on a broader scale because of archival records at each respective presidential library as well as in other published works.

For this historical case study, the researcher focused research efforts on deceased U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon.
The researcher used biographical and historical data of former U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon because of the existence of ample research material from the public record. The researcher gathered detailed information regarding each leader’s personal background history relative to educational, family, peer, and religious influences to establish individual moral identity development. For President Kennedy, research also focused on ethical decisions made by Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis that helped to eliminate the potential for a nuclear holocaust with Russia. In contrast, research also examined the unethical decisions made by President Nixon during the Watergate scandal, which resulted in his impeachment and resignation as president.

Former U.S. President John F. Kennedy represented a very interesting case study because of his personal background and the complex nature of the foreign policy crises he faced during the presidency (Kaufman, 1993). According to Heath (1985), President Kennedy possessed a rational idealist ideology because he understood “the world was not a moral place” (p. 302); therefore, he understood how this inherent aspect of life served as a constant test of leadership. Though the Bay of Pigs failure proved a black mark on Kennedy’s abilities as a decision maker in the early days of his presidency (Friedman, 2011), Kennedy demonstrated greater qualities as an ethical decision maker in subsequent key events. For more than 50 years, President Kennedy embodied the ideal of ethical leadership to the American people because of his decisiveness in the Cuban Missile Crisis and in his decision to send a man to the moon. Gibson (2011) noted that Kennedy’s presidency and leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis served as the subject of study by many scholars and students. However, no studies appeared to exist regarding his moral identity and how his moral identity influenced his decision making. For this reason, this study explored Kennedy’s moral identity relative to background influences and how this moral identity affected decision making during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In contrast to the Kennedy presidency, the presidency of Richard M. Nixon demonstrated a different reputation in the historical record. Demonstrating a complex persona that revealed certain insecurities as well as an inability to relate to others on one hand (Guzlowski, 1987), Nixon also demonstrated a predictable facet to his words and political ideas (Gonchar & Hahn, 1971). Though Nixon accomplished certain noteworthy achievements within his presidency, his presidency became marred by the Watergate scandal, which culminated in Nixon’s resignation from office (Azari, 2010). The Watergate scandal included revelations not only from documents and court testimony, but also from recordings in the Nixon tapes that revealed Nixon’s complicity with Watergate (Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, 2013). Regardless, Nixon’s legacy still remained of interest to researchers and scholars to understand him as a personal and political figure (Edgerton, 2012). However, no studies appeared to exist regarding Nixon’s moral identity and its influence on his decisions while serving as president. For this reason, this study explored Nixon’s moral identity relative to background influences and how this moral identity affected decisions that led to Watergate and the downfall of President Nixon.

Data Analysis
To commence data analysis of the coded data in NVivo for each study subject, the researcher performed different queries for content analysis and word frequency reports of the top 50 words of six or more letters. These initial queries provided...
cluster analysis reports, tree maps, word clouds, and word frequency summaries that revealed patterns for each study subject as well as helped to identify emerging themes that could indicate moral identity formation.

**Results**

Plotting the results of the frequency queries for the four moral identity influences on a line chart provided initial comparisons of how the moral identity influences for each study subject initially compared with each other. In the case of JFK, this chart revealed that education (frequency measurement of 53) and family (frequency measurement of 52) appeared to influence moral identity development more than that of RMN, who demonstrated a frequency measure of 42 for education and a measure of 25 for family. However, RMN showed higher moral identity influence relative to peers with a frequency measure of 39 than the frequency measure of 22 for peers in the case of JFK. The influence of religion for both subjects did not appear to affect either subject to a significant extent given that both subjects exhibited a frequency measure of 12.

Additional examination of the NVivo data queries revealed the emergence of 10 themes for JFK and 11 themes for RMN. These themes were also plotted on horizontal bar charts to visually determine stronger themes relative to lesser themes based on frequency measurements. The themes that emerged for JFK in descending order of frequency consisted of competitiveness, realism, self-awareness, independence, social awareness, idealism, loyalty, morality, character, and compassion. The themes that emerged for RMN in descending order of frequency consisted of character, Quaker values, competitiveness, attitudes, success-driven, intellectual, model behavior, social acceptance, personal attitudes, shift in belief system, and independence.

In the content analysis queries using NVivo software, the researcher produced word frequency charts for JFK and RMN through the selection of the top 50 words of six letters or more. These charts allowed further corroboration of the emergent core themes as well as provided a visual representation of the emergent themes through descriptive language and words. The word frequency chart for JFK revealed certain keywords (history, intellectual, and winning) that demonstrated influences from education and family and aligned with the emerging themes of idealism, realism, and competition. Closer examination of additional words provided greater insights into the core values and ideology of JFK. Words such as people, chivalry, compassion, independence, justice, responsibility, and idealism reflected an emphasis on social good and doing what's right rather than a focus on personal ambition. In contrast, the word frequency chart for RMN focused on words that reflected core themes of character, competitiveness, and Quaker values such as individual, determination, mother, religion, and religious. Additional analysis of the word frequency chart revealed other words such as character, church, competitive, others, and the name of RMN’s college football coach, Newman. Unlike JFK, the word frequency chart for RMN appeared to reflect concepts with a greater personal focus centered on competition and success rather than a focus on social awareness with a sense of compassion for the welfare of others in society.

Careful analysis of individual core themes for JFK and RMN revealed how each core theme could represent either positive or negative moral identity development relative to ethical or unethical leadership decisions. To establish moral identity influence and strength for each study subject,
the researcher evaluated each core theme relative to how strong the theme focused on the welfare of other people in society in contrast to a focus on oneself. A strong sense of concern for societal welfare demonstrated a higher moral identity construct. In contrast, a tendency to focus on personal welfare showed a lower moral identity construct. As shown in Table 1, this analysis determined that 9 of 10 (90%) of the emerging themes for JFK showed that JFK possessed a high moral identity construct to make ethical decisions.

In contrast, research revealed that only 5 of 11 (45%) of the emergent themes for RMN, as shown in Table 2, showed a high moral identity construct. For this reason, comparison showed that JFK demonstrated a much greater moral identity construct than RMN.

**Discussion**

Examination of the emerging core themes for JFK in Table 1 revealed which themes contributed to positive or negative moral identity formation. While competitiveness proved a strong influence within the family life of JFK from childhood through JFK’s college years, it did not serve as the core foundation of JFK’s moral identity. Instead, this competitiveness contributed to the greater sense of independence within JFK. It was this independence that later proved invaluable to moral decisions made by JFK during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Rather than succumb to heavy pressure from military advisors to use military force against the Russians, JFK looked for alternative solutions to avert nuclear war. JFK’s sense of idealism to do the right thing occurred early in life. However, it was tempered by his sense of realism that evolved not only from his college education but from exposure to political and international events before World War II. These events appeared to open JFK’s mind up to increased self-awareness of his strengths as an intellectual and problem solver. Further, this increased self-awareness also contributed to a growth of social awareness of people not only in the United States but also in the global community. JFK took a greater interest in problems faced by others by expanding his worldview. He looked at the world’s problems by understanding the implications of how personal actions could affect other people. These core themes appeared to provide the cornerstone of JFK’s moral identity and his ability to engage in ethical decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis rather than to succumb to peer-related pressures from military advisors in his administration. JFK’s sense of independence combined with his realism, self-awareness, and social awareness demonstrated a high level of moral identity formation in his ability to recognize the greater importance of societal welfare in the important ethical decisions before him. Less significant themes consisted of character, compassion, loyalty, and morality. As shown in Table 1, character, compassion, and morality also contributed to positive moral identity formation, while loyalty proved insignificant (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, 2013a, 2013b; J. F. Kennedy, 1917–1963; R. F. Kennedy, 1974).

Examination of the emerging themes for RMN revealed that character and Quaker values played key roles in initial moral identity development during early childhood and into his early college years. RMN’s family demonstrated strong Quaker beliefs and values entrenched in a well-established Quaker community in which the Nixon family were active participants. Because of his early upbringing, these religious belief systems became ingrained in RMN’s moral fiber and code of conduct. The family exhibited a strong work ethic that became an integral part of RMN’s moral identity to work hard and achieve success. These
common themes also emerged because of RMN’s focus on intellectual pursuits and model behavior in grade school through college (Nixon, 1962, 1978; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, 1909–1967). However, RMN’s college years also influenced the mitigation of religious beliefs to a more moderate stance. Through critical examination of his religious beliefs in a college paper, RMN reevaluated his personal views regarding his religious beliefs and developed a more

Table 1: Core Theme Contributions to Moral Identity Formation in JFK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Attributes of JFK</th>
<th>Moral Identity Formation</th>
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</table>
| Character     | Ethical actions … to serve the greater good of the community (Fry & Sweeney, 2012)  
Prosocial action indicate high moral identity (Arnold et al., 2009; Aquino, Laven, & McFerran, 2011) | Compass  
Commendable judgment  
Independent thinking to improve society | Positive |
| Idealism      | Represents concern for needs of others in society (Finegan & Hastings, 2011)  
Idealists focus on moral action rather than immoral (Bloodgood, Mudrack, & Turnley, 2012) | Strong sense of idealism and chivalry  
Core belief of right and wrong  
Doing the right thing for the common good | Positive |
| Realism       | Realists consider moral implications, consequences, and others’ interests (Lentner, 2011) | Able to view issues in deeper context to recognize economic, political, and international considerations | Positive |
| Compass       | Central component of moral identity development (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2009) | Demonstrated compassion and social responsibility | Positive |
| Competitiveness | Source of personal discovery and personal improvement (Bloodgood et al., 2012) | Learned to achieve high goals balanced with public service  
Influenced JFK’s sense of independence | Positive |
| Independence  | Ability to rely on personal judgment | Lack of conformity; Self-confidence; Autonomy; Ability to think for himself to develop solutions | Positive |
| Loyalty       | Loyalty can conflict with impartiality in moral decision making (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013) | Remained loyal to his family but did not allow loyalty to interfere with ethical decisions | Neutral/Negative |
| Self-awareness | Integration of beliefs and values with the self-concept (Fry & Sweeney, 2012) | Demonstrated strong sense of self-identity and self-acceptance  
Did what was most important to him  
Showed his intellectual capabilities to peers | Positive |
| Social awareness | Individuals with social awareness build positive relationships to achieve goals (Fry & Sweeney, 2012)  
Positive relationships promote moral courage and enhance moral action (Avolio & Hannah, 2010) | Developed greater awareness of world through observing people and events to better understand societal issues  
Became more sensitive to needs of others  
Expanded his worldview and developed stronger sense of social responsibility | Positive |
| Morality      | Sense of right and wrong | Initial sense of moral ideology established through religious teachings | Positive |

Note: Attributes of JFK obtained through biographical data sources at John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.
neutral perspective. In addition, he recognized the change within his Quaker belief system through this new worldview (Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, 1909−1967, Series V, Box 10:11). Because this clearly shifted his moral identity to a more secular-based foundation, this change opened the door to other changes in his moral beliefs and behavior. During this time in college, RMN developed a higher level of competitiveness because of the influence of his football coach, Coach Newman, who encouraged his players to be winners at all costs. Because RMN highly

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitiveness</td>
<td>Hypercompetitiveness can contribute to unethical behavior because of inability to focus on the needs of others (Bloodgood et al., 2012)</td>
<td>Strong sense of competitiveness because of Coach Newman Loved to win at all costs</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Ability to rely on personal judgment</td>
<td>Initially independent but then became more dependent on what others thought</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Aligned with cognition component of moral orientation indicative of moral identity development (Hart &amp; Matsuba, 2009)</td>
<td>Proven intellectual capability</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model behavior</td>
<td>Adhered to code of conduct and demonstrated exemplary behavior indicates moral identity development (April et al., 2010)</td>
<td>Exemplary student Strong interest in learning</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Core component of moral orientation that help in moral identity formation (Hart &amp; Matsuba, 2009)</td>
<td>Cornerstone of early morality, humility, and interest in welfare of others Respect for hard work, learning, and determination</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success-driven</td>
<td>Focus on achievement of personal success</td>
<td>Heightened competitive spirit to succeed Highly ambitious Wanted to become somebody</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Leadership character demonstrates ethical behavior aligned with values to promote the welfare of others (Fry &amp; Sweeney, 2012)</td>
<td>Contradictory character On the surface, sought to do what’s right, but exhibited behavior that conflicted with this appearance and revealed a focus on himself</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal attitudes</td>
<td>Core component of moral orientation that help in moral identity formation (Hart &amp; Matsuba, 2009)</td>
<td>Supportive of individual rights Sensitive to others</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social acceptance</td>
<td>Desire to be accepted and valued by peers</td>
<td>Strong desire to be accepted and valued by peers Appeared to lack confidence Worried about what others thought of him</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quaker values</td>
<td>Sense of values derived from Quaker religious community</td>
<td>Strong belief and buy-in with Quaker values and belief systems through his family in early years</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift in belief system</td>
<td>Change in sense of values and belief</td>
<td>Acknowledged that he no longer held the same sense of values and beliefs he held as a child</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Attributes of RMN obtained through biographical data sources at Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA.
respected Coach Newman, this way of thinking became the mantra for the young RMN, and he adopted this ideology as a cornerstone philosophy (Nixon, 1978). RMN also became more concerned about his level of social acceptance among his peers. As a result, he demonstrated a lower level of independence. What emerged from these moral identity influences was a paradigm shift that may have caused a new sense of moral priorities in RMN, dependent on personal interpretations of peer perceptions. Stated differently, RMN may have allowed peer influences and his sense of competitiveness to overshadow higher levels of moral identity because of his need for acceptance by others as well as his need for success to feel validated.

Through analysis of the core themes for each subject, an important revelation that emerged was the unique, individualized aspect of the themes identified in this study. Though each study subject shared three themes consisting of character, competitiveness, and independence, the remaining seven themes for JFK and eight themes for RMN clearly demonstrated differences unique to each individual. These unique emergent themes aligned with Brown and Mitchell (2010), who noted how different people display variable behavior and individual dimensions of moral identity. Further, this confirmed prior study results that also established differences relative to personal moral actions (Aquino et al., 2008).

The emergent core themes for JFK demonstrated how early influences of education, family, peers, and religion helped to shape his individual moral identity construct and establish the cornerstone of ethical decision making during the Cuban Missile Crisis. For example, religious influences in JFK’s early childhood helped to shape the core theme of morality. In early morality theory, Socrates described this as the foundation of individual moral beliefs known as virtue ethics (Plato, n.d./1900). Other philosophies described the personal sense of morality from birth (Aristotle, n.d./1813; Aristotle, n.d./1908). Development of the core theme of morality could also be ascribed to the stages of cognitive development described by Piaget (1932) and the development of moral reason (Kohlberg, 1971) when JFK learned to adhere to moral-based societal norms. The influence of education on JFK’s morality also aligned with the emergence of character and idealism. According to Aristotle (n.d./1833), character emerged from personal virtue. Further, character comprised one of the four elements of individual moral development (Rest et al., 1999). For this reason, the core theme of character closely aligned with moral identity development. In addition, virtuous actions and ideologies discussed by Aristotle (n.d./1813; n.d./1908) explained how JFK’s sense of idealism contributed to the development of his moral identity construct.

The emergent theme of self-awareness revealed how JFK appeared to recognize his identity from an early age. This insight aligned with the early theory that the sense of identity begins at birth (Aristotle, n.d./1813; n.d./1908). Further, this also affirmed Locke (1690/1775), who asserted that self-awareness represented an essential component of personal identity because of alignment with the individual sense of moral responsibility. This idea emerged in JFK’s greater sense of compassion and realism regarding society as well as its contribution to greater social awareness that influenced JFK to act in a morally responsible manner. In addition, this insight affirmed how the individual can empathize with the emotional needs of others (Smith, 1759/1761) and can demonstrate a duty to act with moral conduct (Kant, 1785/2008). Further, these core themes for JFK appeared to correspond with the fifth and sixth stages noted...
by Kohlberg (1971) that he identified as social contract and principled conscience, respectively. In Kohlberg’s explanation of these stages, the majority of adults failed to attain these stages because of the inability to care for others, demonstrate a conscience in behavior toward others, and a lack of respect for universal value systems. Because of these revelations, the core themes of social awareness, realism, and compassion for JFK appeared to indicate a stronger sense of moral identity formation compared to other people in society.

Examination of JFK’s emergent theme of loyalty to family demonstrated a possible detriment and disruptive influence to the moral identity construct. Prior research by Jones (1991) revealed that issues of authority, socialization, and dynamics of group interactions could affect moral intent and actions. However, closer analysis of the core themes showed how the intense competitiveness found throughout the Kennedy family also affected the heightened level of independence found in JFK. Because of this independent nature, JFK demonstrated a strong ability to think independently of other influences to engage in ethical decision making. For this reason, the competitiveness of JFK appeared to influence a stronger sense of independence. However, analysis revealed that RMN demonstrated a different dynamic in which he possessed a lessened sense of independence and a greater focus on competitiveness.

For RMN, emergent themes revealed components of the moral identity construct that appeared to serve as contributing factors to the unethical actions by RMN during the Watergate scandal. Analysis showed that attitudes, character, and Quaker values served as early influences to RMN’s early moral development. Similar to JFK’s upbringing, influences from family and religion served as a cornerstone in shaping moral standards in early childhood to understand differences between right and wrong. These moral standards demonstrated alignment with the germinal theoretical framework of virtue ethics initially proposed by Aristotle (Plato, n.d./1900). The evolution of RMN’s sense of values and moral standards included the core theme of model behavior exhibited by RMN in which others observed him as a good boy. This insight corresponded to the preconventional third stage of moral development noted by Kohlberg (1971). The intense focus by RMN to exhibit intellectual ability as a model student revealed his obsessive tendency to be well respected and liked by his peers. As a result, this behavior demonstrated that this focus was a crucial aspect of his personal identity. Because the third stage of moral development discusses the need for the individual to seek peer approval (Kohlberg, 1971), this explained why social acceptance comprised an essential component of RMN’s moral identity development. Peer influences appeared to contribute to the development of personal attitudes in RMN in which he showed empathy to individuals during childhood.

Unlike the results determined for JFK, the core theme of competitiveness failed to increase RMN’s sense of independence. Instead, RMN’s competitiveness appeared to align more closely with the success-driven theme. RMN focused greater attention on peer approval through the theme of social acceptance that diminished his sense of independence. These revelations corroborated with Kohlberg (1971) who noted how peer influence affected the development of moral identity within the individual. In addition to these insights, analysis of the emergent themes of competitiveness and success-driven showed that RMN possessed an intense preoccupation with personal success as well as a strong determination for self-fulfillment. Piaget (1932) referred to this as egocentric thinking in the period of early development while Kohlberg
(1971) referred to this as a focus on individual self-interests. The emergent themes of competitiveness, success-driven, and intellectual probably contributed to RMN’s shift in belief system theme because of his strengthened self-focus. In addition, RMN’s strong sense of competitiveness and drive for success probably helped to contribute to RMN’s increased propensity to engage in unethical decision making during the Watergate affair.

The results of this case study demonstrated significance to prior leadership research from the literature review in several ways. Through this study, results helped to corroborate, validate, and explore previous moral identity research while also laying a foundation for future qualitative research studies relative to this leadership topic. This study provided further support for the moral identity model by Hart and Matsuba (2009) by showing how social influences and the moral orientation affected the moral identity construct of the study subjects of this case study. Because this study focused primarily on moral identity influences relative to education, family, peers, and religion, the results corroborated with research by April et al. (2010) that showed how family, education, spirituality, peers, and other influences can enable ethical conduct.

Through examination of the moral identity constructs of JFK and RMN, research revealed the importance of core values and commitment to moral principles for ethical leadership thus demonstrating alignment with prior research by Poff (2010) and Johnson et al. (2009). In addition, this study corroborated prior research by Carter and Stets (2011, 2012) regarding how moral identity guided ethical behavior. Research also supported how moral identity influenced the ability to form relationships (Caldwell, 2009) as evidenced by the stronger relationships built by JFK contrasted by the lack of relationships exhibited by RMN.

Because the comparison of study results to prior leadership research findings showed similarities, the veracity of study findings appeared to demonstrate trustworthiness. In addition, these results showed that the study method proved reliable given the corroboration of study results with prior research. As a result, this study showed that the use of biographical data relative to education, family, peers, and religion provided revelations regarding moral identity development. Further, the ability to develop emerging themes yielded interesting insights relative to positive or negative moral identity development, especially when scholars considered how individual moral identity demonstrated concern for the welfare of others versus concern for oneself.

**Conclusion**

The results from this study provided insights into how moral identity can influence ethics and decisions of organizational leaders. Through analysis of moral identity influences of education, family, peers, and religion, this study revealed emergent core themes for each study subject to help the researcher identify positive and negative moral identity development. Core themes demonstrating a concern for the welfare of others typically aligned with positive moral identity development; whereas, core themes demonstrating a self-focus generally aligned with negative moral identity development. Study results of JFK suggested that a leader who engages in ethical decision making may possess the ability to exhibit greater independence from peer influences combined with moderate combinations of idealism, realism, personal awareness, and social awareness. In contrast, study results of RMN revealed that the need for social acceptance and a lower ability to remain independent of peer influences combined with
heightened levels of competitiveness and success drivers can encourage unethical decisions. These results demonstrated the unique dimensions of moral identity development within individuals. Because individuals reflect different experiences and influences in the development of moral identity, results may only provide limited generalizability to a larger population by helping future researchers to identify positive and negative aspects of moral identity development.

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